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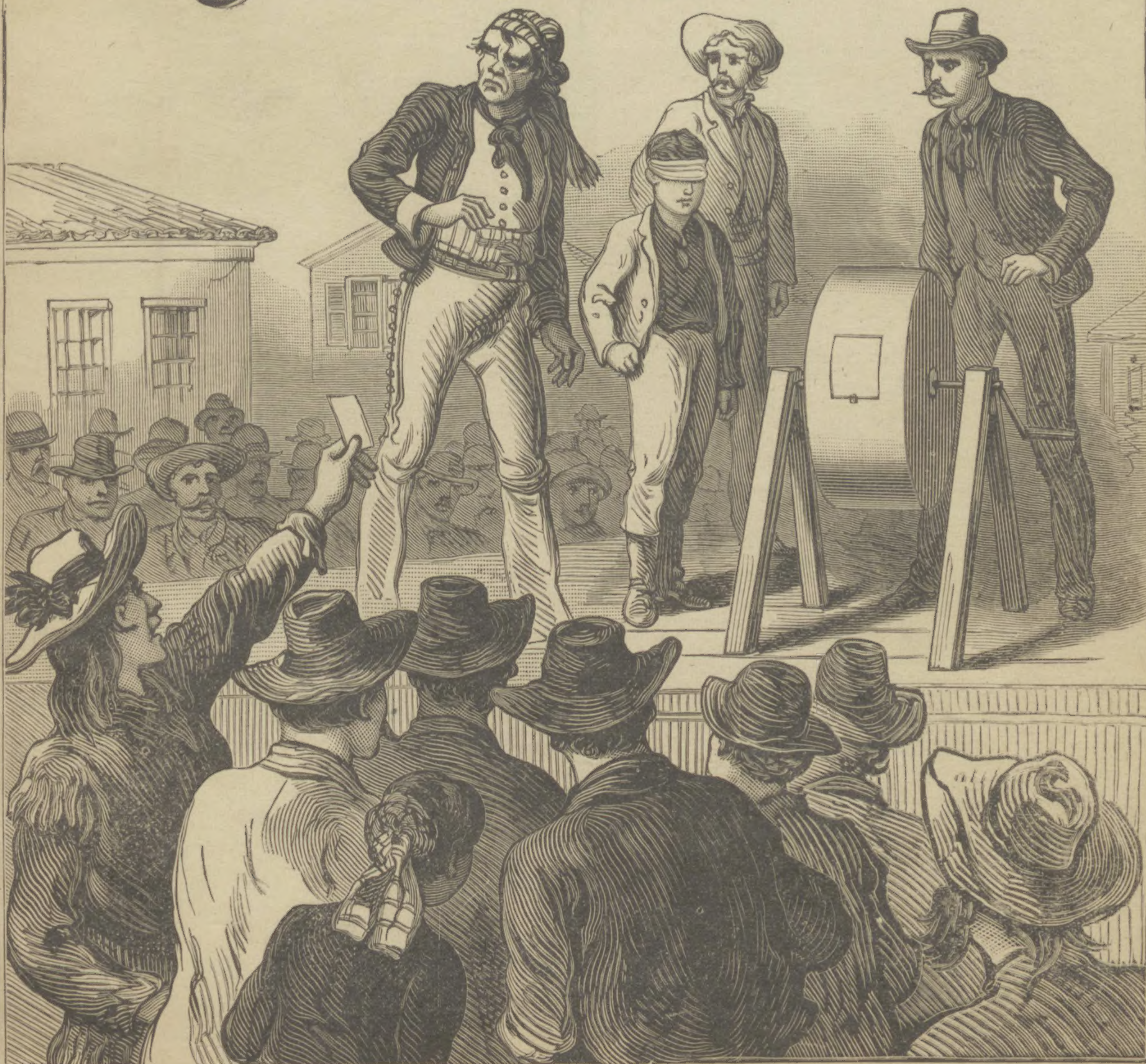
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Vol. LXXVII

THE BRAND-BURNERS OF CIMARRON. BY JOHN W. OSBON.



"I HOLD THAT NUMBER!" PAWNEE BILL ANNOUNCED, WHILE SPANISH JOHN RECOILED IN AMAZEMENT.

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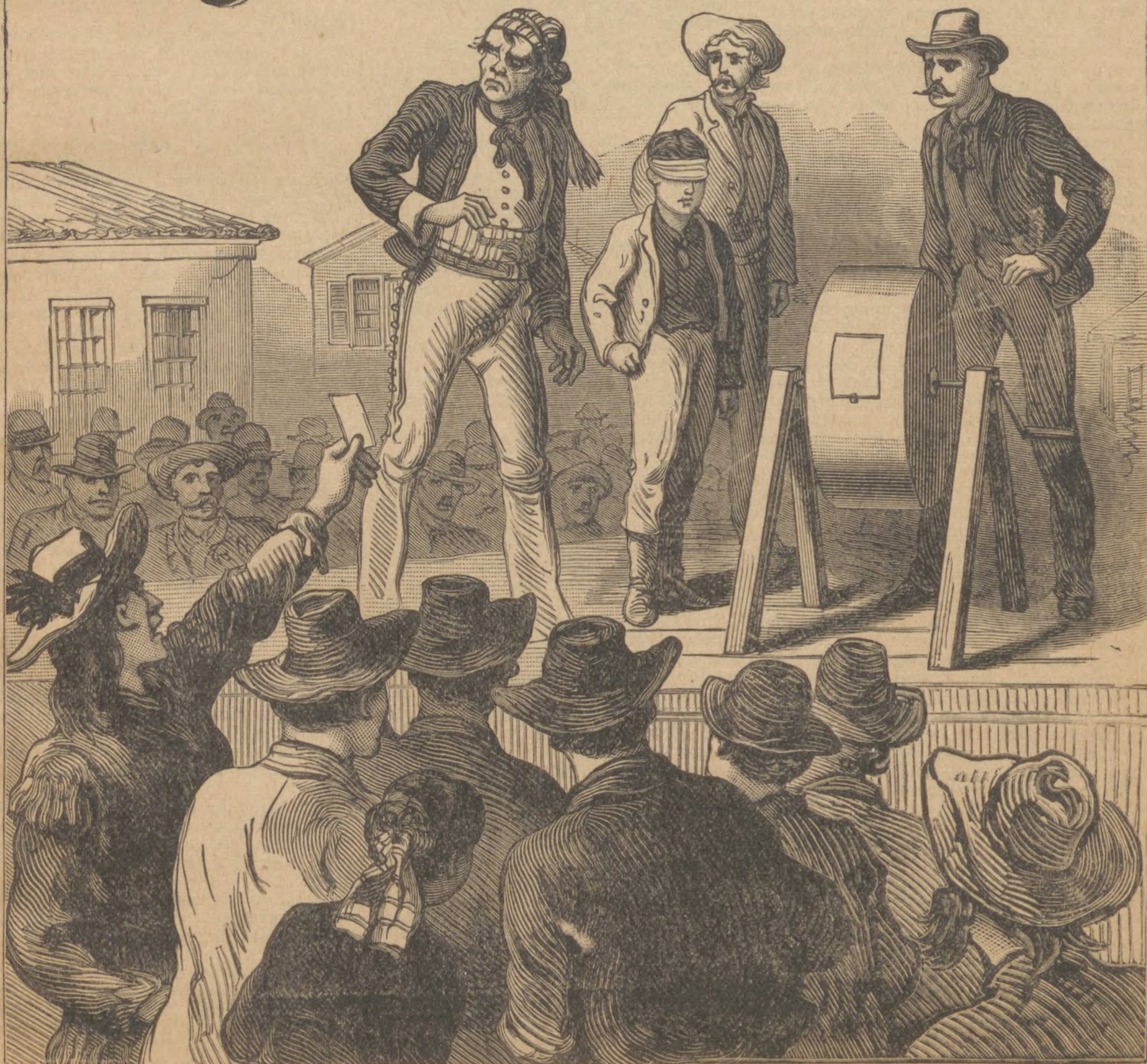
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"I HOLD THAT NUMBER!" PAWNEE BILL ANNOUNCED, WHILE SPANISH JOHN RECOILED IN AMAZEMENT.

The Brand-Burners of Cimarron;

OR,

Detective Goldspur's Pard.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,

AUTHOR OF "SPORT FROM ST. LOUIS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FOOT-RACE.

"A hundred dollars on the white man!

"Walk up, gentlemen! Here you get action for your money, and—hundred to hundred—to ninety—eighty—seventy—sixty—fifty! Ay! Gentlemen, a two-to-one shot at last!

"Now—who dares?"

Loudly, that banter rang forth, and Spanish John, glancing his single fiery optic over the crowd, flourished a plethoric roll of greenbacks in support of his challenge.

'Twas an election day, and the little Oklahoma town of Tiptop City was fairly thronged with people. Ranchmen, farmers, traders, Indians and negroes made up the motley crowd. A babel of confusion reigned, and all seemed bubbling over with expectancy.

Tiptop had been a scene of great political activity during the campaign just closed, and a speakers' platform, nearly four feet in height, built of native lumber, stood near the southern end of the wide street. This street, hard and smooth, stretched away two hundred yards to the northward without break or flaw, and was in almost daily use as a race course.

For the citizens of Tiptop City, almost to a man, were sportively inclined, and horse-race or foot-race ever proved a popular drawing card.

At the northern end of that barren, red-clay stretch, marked by curb, gallows and rope, was the town well. There, closely hemmed in by a portion of the excited crowd, were the principals in the impending event, Luke Lightfoot and Pawnee Bill.

The first was a denizen of Tiptop, a sport and all-around athlete—a trim, well-built fellow, slightly under medium size, but quick and wiry, with tendons and muscles like spring steel.

Pawnee Bill, a quarter-blood, was a stranger in town. Tall and finely-formed, he was in no point the inferior of his opponent in muscularity or suppleness.

Both men were in readiness for the race-course, and were awaiting the starter's orders.

Spanish John, from his position upon the platform at the southern end of the street, noted as much, and stamped the floor angrily. His vehement challenge had drawn the attention of all within reach of his voice; but Luke Lightfoot was an admitted champion, an undefeated man, and no one cared to hazard his money upon the stranger.

Again that banter rang forth, ending as before with that fiercely enunciated:

"Now—who dares?"

A brief hush fell upon the throng. Then an armed horseman, who had a moment before entered town by the southern trail urged his clean-limbed roan through the crowd to a position beside the platform and quickly replied:

"I dares, Pard Single-Eye! I calls yer bluff! A hundred on ther quarter-blood!"

Starting sharply, the dark-faced gambler again swept the upturned faces until his gaze rested upon the horseman.

A tall man, splendidly formed, but roughly dressed, with laughing blue eyes, long, crisply-curling red hair, beard and mustache. He nodded quickly as he came beneath the gambler's gaze, and from between his gleaming white teeth pealed a peculiar laugh:

"Har—har—har!"

A flush dyed Spanish John's sinister face, then as quickly faded, leaving his

dry, parchment-like skin a sickly yellow hue.

"You dare? And who are you?" he cried.

"Hercules Redrock."

"A stranger here, eh?"

"Never saw Tiptop till ter-day."

"You came from—"

"Brimstone Butte, you bet! An' I can out-howl, out-fight or out-run a passle o' wildcats! Har—har—har!"

"A regular chief, eh? Well, Redrock, we sh'an't quarrel, just yet. Step right this way, and I'll cover your money."

Leaving his horse, he of the red beard sprang nimbly upon the platform, and flashed a roll of bills from his pocket.

A stakeholder was quickly selected, and in another minute the money was posted.

That done, the gambler nodded curtly, and again stepped to the edge of the platform.

"Right this way, gentlemen, one and all, if you wish to back the quarter-blood," he shouted, waving the roll of bank notes high above his head. "First come, first served! Don't—"

"Stiddy, bo!" interrupted Redrock, tapping Spanish John's shoulder. "No need ter split yer thrapple!"

"Meaning—"

"Name yer limit, an' I'll cover it."

"Two hundred, even."

"Same odds?"

"Two to one—yes."

"Done! Har—har!"

Spanish John hastily counted off the money. There was a suspicious gleam in his fierce, black eye as he passed the cash to the stakeholder, and he darted a significant glance at a dashing-looking horseman near the platform.

A keen-witted man, detecting that glance, would have instantly decided that there was an understanding between the gambler and the gayly-dressed rider.

That at least was the conclusion reached by the red-bearded sport, and as he swung himself into the saddle there was a gleam in his steely blue eyes which told that he was on his guard.

At that juncture a warning shout from the starter caused the crowd to part, right and left, leaving a clear space some twelve feet in width, extending from the platform to the town pump.

Then, amid almost breathless silence, the contestants advanced side by side to the scratch, and fell into position to await the signal.

It came promptly. A pistol cracked, and both lithe, sinewy bodies sped swiftly from the line.

The start was an even one, and in the first fifty yards neither sprinter gained an advantage. Then the quarter-blood strengthened his pace, and took the lead, showing a clear gain of no less than four feet at the hundred-yard mark.

Luke Lightfoot's first defeat seemed assured, and a murmur, quickly rising to a yell, attested the keen interest of the spectators.

Spanish John scowled darkly, and a nervous tremor shook his gaunt form. Again his blinking black eye sought the gaudily-attired horseman, seeming to say:

"Forward there, Dandy Dave! Do your work. Rob the quarter-blood of victory!"

And that mute command met with prompt obedience. Swinging his spur-goaded horse squarely around, Dandy Dave uttered a shout of mock alarm and artfully urged the steed forward, forcing the crowd to break ranks and partially obstruct that side of the course held by Pawnee Bill!

So skilfully executed was that dastardly maneuver that but few in the blindly-surgng throng suspected it had been carefully prearranged and had for its object the defeat of the quarter-blood.

But at that critical moment Hercules Redrock rose in his stirrups, and a yell, shrill with anger, rang high above the tumult. The coils of a lariat shot through the air. The noose settled snugly around the neck of Dandy Dave's steed. Then

the glossy horsehair strand tightened with an indescribable twang, jerking the animal off his feet.

Dandy Dave, agile as a cat, escaped the fall by a timely leap. White with fury, he plucked a weapon from his belt and turned to seek the lariat-thrower.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS DEATH.

"Kill the scoundrel!" yelled Spanish John, hopping along the edge of the platform in impotent fury. "Teach him and his ilk a lesson, Dandy!"

Then it suddenly occurred to the gambler that he was showing his hand too openly, and with a muttered oath he lapsed into silence.

And Dandy? Nodding a curt response to that fierce request, the knave pushed quickly through the crowd, and in another minute confronted the red-bearded sport.

"Har—har! Blocked yer leetle game that time, didn't I?" mocked Redrock, regarding his foe with cool contempt. "Say, you an' Spanish John aire a dizzy pair!"

Dandy Dave flourished his revolver in an extremely ugly manner. Redrock had not drawn a weapon—a fact which added not a little to the ruffian's assurance.

"Scoundrel! You shall pay dearly for your trick!" he declared, in blustering tones. "No man can serve me after that fashion and escape unpunished!"

"You know et!"

"Yes! And your blood shall wipe out the insult you have put upon me. But I am not one to strike a defenseless foe, so draw—"

A fresh burst of yells and cheers drowned the remainder of the sentence, and out of that babel of sounds both men distinguished enough to assure them the judges had declared Pawnee Bill victorious.

Thereupon an angry flush suffused Dandy's face, then quickly faded. His gleaming white teeth shut with a click, and the weapon in his hand exploded.

Warned by the fierce glitter of the ruffian's eyes, Redrock, resorting to an old Indian trick, swung behind his horse just in time to escape that dastardly shot. Then, hanging by spur and hand, the sport drew a weapon and quickly fired from beneath the animal's neck.

A howl of pain greeted that sharp detonation. Leaving his weapon where it had fallen, Dandy Dave grasped his injured hand and sped away.

Quickly righting himself in the saddle, Hercules Redrock weapons in hand, glanced at the startled spectators, and coolly nodded.

"Right's right, gentlemen, but thet critter was dead wrong," he tersely explained. "He bucked his hoss in ter foul ther quarter-blood. Thet would'a' robbed me, too, so I chipped in."

"Shorely, stranger—"

"Redrock, pard—Here Redrock, f'm Brimstone Butte."

"An' mine's King—Burton King, Mr. Redrock. But, shorely, you don't charge foul play?"

"Yas, with Dandy Dave an' Spanish John in on ther deal," he of the red beard asserted.

"Those are bold words, Mr. Redrock!"

"An' I'm a bold man, Mr. King! Har—har!"

That peculiar cachination proved infectious. A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd. Then all became silent, and fifty pairs of eyes peered sharply at the sport.

Somehow, those carelessly uttered words had impressed his hearers, and for the moment they were ready to believe Hercules Redrock anything he should proclaim himself to be.

"Wal, look out for Spanish John," Burton King warned. "Yer words will shorely be carried to him, an' jest as shorely he'll try ter make ye eat 'em."

"You know et! But, I say, pards, I'm goin' ter camp in Tiptop a while. Ef thar's a livery barn in town—"

"King's yer man!"

"Yes, I run just such a place," Burton King hastily averred. "In fact both barn an' camp-house."

A strange hush came over the little circle of auditors at mention of the camp-house, and Redrock fancied there was a slight tremor in King's full tones.

"Wal?"

"Of course, I'd be glad ter have ye putt up with me. Use of ther camp-house, ye understand, is free ter patrons of my barn. But it is only fair ter tell ye thar's a corpse thar now."

"A corpse, eh?"

"Yas; a man died thar last night. But he is ter be buried in a couple of hours. Ther place will then be open for use."

"A gun-play?"

"Oh, no! Heart disease, I reckon, for ther chap went off sudden an' nacherel."

Hercules Redrock pondered a moment, then nodded.

"Wal, I'll go down with you, an' put up. I'll get my money, an' we'll be off."

Thus speaking, the sport carefully recoiled his lariat, then rode forward and stepped from the saddle to the platform.

Spanish John hailed his appearance with an ill-concealed grimace of chagrin.

"Pay the gentleman the money," he tersely ordered, turning to the stakeholder. "He wins."

"Mr. Redrock, I trust you will afford me a chance for revenge in the near future."

"You bet!" and with that curt response the sport thrust the roll of bills into his pocket, mounted and rode away, rejoining Burton King on the outskirts of the crowd.

About three hundred yards off the street, in the edge of the open prairie lying east of the little town, stood a long, low building, and toward it the liveryman led the way. Redrock dismounted just inside the huge door. Then terms were quickly agreed upon, and in another minute the splendid roan was in a comfortable stall.

A hasty inspection of the interior of the building showed the sport that a space in one corner, probably twelve by sixteen feet, had been securely boxed in, and he readily inferred that it was the camp-house of which King had spoken.

"Yas, that's ther place," the latter observed, following the sport's glance. "Inside, ye'll find a stove fer cookin' an' a good bunk."

"I'll sleep there, ter be near my hoss, but will get my meals up town."

"As ye please. Ther place is locked now. I thought best ter keep et closed till—Would you like a look at ther corpse?"

Redrock nodded.

"Thar's nothin' ter hinder, I reckon. Who was ther critter?"

"A stranger hyar, name o' Brown—John Brown. He got in jest before dark. Thar was a gal with him—a bound critter called Ruby Ranger. He made arrangements fer her ter pass ther night at Zebulon Peggs's, an' thar she went, right after supper."

"An' now?"

"Oh, she's thar yet. Thar was no love lost 'twixt her an' Brown, I reckon, for she's refused ter see ther corpse. But I tell ye, Redrock, she's a peach—a cherry-flipped hummer from Beauty Town, an' I'll bet my claim ag'in' a wet ca'tridge she's as good as she's purty."

The sport smiled at the liveryman's earnestness. Then the two walked forward, and with a key taken from his pocket, King unlocked the camp-house door.

The apartment was shrouded in gloom, but Redrock could distinguish the form of the dead traveler, reposing on a number of boards placed upon trestles, near the centre of the room.

Then King swept aside the dingy curtains covering the two small windows in the front wall, and a flood of light poured into the place.

The face of the corpse, thus brought into bold relief, showed that John Brown had been a man of repulsive appearance.

The features were heavy and of sullen, almost brutal cast.

A look of terrible agony rested upon the waxen visage, and the hands, large and calloused by years of toil, were tightly clinched.

As the sport noted these facts, a peculiar look flashed from his blue eyes, and he turned abruptly to Burton King.

"Was Brown alone when he died?" he asked.

"No. After ther gal went away, Spanish John an' Rupert Belmont came in. They seemed ter be old friends. Ther three sat in ther camp-house an' talked fer upwards of an hour. Then thar was an outcry, an' when I ran in Brown was on ther floor—dead."

Redrock nodded quickly. Then he gripped the liveryman's shoulder with a steel-like clutch, and in a low tone exclaimed:

"King, I am goin' ter trust ye with a secret. That was foul play hyar!"

"Shorely, they didn't—didn't—"

"Kill him? Yas! John Brown died by poison an' ther crime lies betwixt Rupert Belmont and Spanish John."

CHAPTER III.

A PLOT.

Rupert Belmont was rated the wealthiest man in Tiptop City. He was nearly forty years of age, a bachelor, and of fine appearance.

He owned a section near the town, and made his home there, with a widowed half-sister, a Mrs. Quantrell.

"The Silver Shades," Tiptop's single saloon and gambling house, was also owned by Belmont, and report said that the rancher had found it a veritable bonanza.

It was here that Spanish John held sway, having full control of the various games, and it was generally understood that he received a fixed percentage of the earnings of the tables as payment for his services.

On the evening that John Brown and his protegee arrived in Tiptop, the rancher and the gambler were seated together in a small apartment on the second floor of the building occupied by the Silver Shades. Belmont's dark face wore a frown, while Spanish John was explaining certain points in a daring scheme they had in hand.

While they were thus engaged a sharp rap sounded at the door, and in response to the rancher's call a boy of fourteen years stepped briskly into the room.

"Good evenin', gents," he saluted.

"Howdy, Gimps," Spanish John responded. "What's up now?"

"A galoot at King's camp-house wants ter see ye. Says his name's Brown, an' that ye're old friends o' his."

"Brown, eh?"

"Yas, sir—John Brown. He got in about an hour ago. Brought a gal with him."

"And the girl?"

"He sent her over ter Peggs's, ther cobbler, ter stay ter night."

This bit of news was evidently displeasing to the men. They exchanged uneasy glances. Then the gambler again spoke, saying:

"All right, Gimps. Run down and tell Brown we'll be there presently."

The boy nodded and withdrew, closing the door.

"Brown is a fool!" the rancher exclaimed, rising angrily.

"Yes; but the matter can't be helped, now. Perhaps no harm will come of it. I suspect he is alarmed by the chase that accursed detective has given him."

"Goldspur?"

"Yes."

"I too, suspect we are in danger from him."

"No! If he is yet on the trail, he must take one of three fords on the Cimarron to reach Tiptop. All of the fords are guarded. He'll find a grave in the treacherous quicksands of the river!"

The rancher shuddered.

"I had not counted on going so far," he muttered.

"You should have considered all possibilities," Spanish John retorted, and his single eye glittered balefully. "In playing for a stake of such magnitude, your plans should have comprehended every contingency."

"That is true, partner. But are you sure Brown has the right girl?"

"Yes. He kidnapped her at my command ten years ago. Her father had destroyed my eye—had made me an outcast, and the abduction was part of my revenge."

"That revenge is nearly complete. For ten years Major Duncan has traveled far and near in search of his lost child. He has used money with a lavish hand, but to no avail. And during this time his two properties, Ten-Bar Ranch and the Touchstone Mine, have easily quadrupled in value."

"The girl inherits all?"

"I have so assured you on numerous occasions, Rupert. Do you doubt me?"

"Hardly that. But I wonder that you do not plot to marry the girl yourself, and thus secure all."

"Humph! There is an insuperable barrier between us; just what need not now be stated. Now, are you willing to abide by the terms of our compact?"

"Yes. I have never seen the girl, but her superb fortune will certainly atone for my physical defect or mental—"

"Rest easy on that score, Rupert! Ruby Ranger is as beautiful as an angel, and as good as beautiful. Nor has her education been neglected. In short, she is fitted both by nature and by art to grace the highest circles to which her great wealth may command an entrance."

"Brown's wife was a woman of education and refinement, and Ruby was her especial charge. She died only a few weeks ago, and it is that fact which has brought this matter to a head."

"I'll do my best, but if fair means fail—"

"If fair means fail, we must resort to coercion. Leave the matter in my hands. I assure you I am quite competent to arrange it. Now, let us go. Brown will become impatient."

Belmont offered no objection. Indeed, he seemed eager to move, his last scruples having been swept aside by the cunning gambler. On the way to the camp-house no word passed between them; but Spanish John's heavy brows wore a frown, and his single optic stared straight ahead, gleaming with a bold, evil light.

John Brown had been anxiously awaiting their appearance, and he greeted them in a tone expressive of relief. Motioning them to seats, he partially closed the camp-house door, then sat down, saying:

"I am here pursuant to agreement, Bar—"

"Sh! Not that name, but Spanish John, old friend!" quickly interrupted the gambler, with a wary glance at the half-open door. "Let us touch as lightly upon the past as possible."

Brown nodded coolly.

"As you will. Let it answer, then, that I am ready to fulfill the compact between us. Shall we proceed with that business now?"

"Yes; you may speak freely before my friend, Mr. Belmont," the gambler assured.

"Very well, then. The girl is here, per agreement. It has been a tight chase. I have been followed all the way from Denver by detectives, and, as I wrote, escaped only by repeatedly doubling on the trail. Yet, they were not far behind me when I left Arkansas City, and I must leave here not later than midnight."

"You have the money ready?"

"Every dollar."

"Very good. I arranged to have the girl spend the night at the house of one Zebulon Peggs. As I understand it, you desire to restore her to her father, Major Duncan?"

"Exactly."

"Well, you will find her there in the

morning. I have written a short note, partially explaining matters, which I shall entrust to you to deliver to her."

"It doesn't state that she is Major Duncan's daughter?" queried Spanish John.

"No; you may unfold that fact to her in your own way. Let it answer, now, that she is a good girl—one whom even Duncan may well be proud to acknowledge his daughter. My wife—"

Brown ended abruptly. His wrinkled brow gathered in a slight frown. He looked suspiciously from one to the other of his callers, and asked:

"You mean no harm to Ruby, gentlemen?"

"Assuredly not," Spanish John declared.

"It is well. While there is a wide gulf between us, I tell you now that I would protect her at any hazard. In fact, I had almost decided to take her to Major Duncan and throw myself upon his mercy!"

"How foolish!" sneered the gambler.

"He would shoot you on sight," Belmont averred.

"You need have no fears, Johnny Brown," Spanish John continued, after a moment. "No harm shall come to the girl. Indeed, I have busied myself for months past in her behalf, and when she returns to her father it will be under a husband's protection."

"A husband?"

"So I said. I have decided that Ruby Ranger shall wed my friend here, Rupert Belmont."

That announcement came like a thunderclap out of a clear sky. Leaping to his feet, Brown glared angrily at the two men.

"I object!" he exclaimed, sharply.

"Why?"

"Because, Barmillo, your friend Rupert Belmont is an infernal scoundrel!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MESSENGER.

At that abrupt declaration, the rancher's face grew red, and his eyes gleamed wickedly; but for Spanish John's prompt intervention, he would have sprung upon the speaker.

"Sit down, Belmont," the gambler ordered. "Don't give point to the quip by showing your teeth!"

"Brown, you are extremely candid in expressing your opinion!"

"Yes. I judge the man by the company I find him in. You, Barmillo, are a miserable cutthroat. But for you I would be free of crime."

"Granted!"

"I sometimes think of revenge."

"You are wise to shrink from attempting it! Sit down. Let us come to terms."

"I fear it is impossible. Certain it is that I shall never agree to Ruby's marriage with that man."

"Be sensible, and we may waive that point."

"Can I trust you?"

"You will be compelled to do so. Remember, you are an outlaw—a criminal. You abducted Major Duncan's daughter. Both you and your victim are here. We can wrest her from you, and you will be powerless to resist."

"You forget, Barmillo, that you instigated the abduction."

"You cannot prove it!"

"Nor can you prove that Ruby Ranger is Duncan's daughter. The power to do that is vested in me alone!"

The gambler winced.

"True! true! Sit down, man, and let us come to terms," he iterated. "It is folly for us to quarrel."

"Swear to waive the marriage, and to restore the girl to her father, and I will depart at midnight, leaving her here. Refuse, and I shall go straight to Duncan with the whole story, much as I dread the step."

"Very well, then. I swear."

"And I," added Belmont, quick to follow the gambler's lead.

"We shall consider the point settled,

then, gentlemen; I will go; the girl shall remain. I warn you, though, that I shall not be far distant. I intend to keep an eye on Ruby, and any infraction of your agreement shall be promptly punished."

"Meaning—just what?"

"Just this, Barmillo: the girl is bound to me by law, and I shall keep the articles of indenture, that I may reclaim her should you attempt to wed her to that scoundrel!"

Again Brown pointed to Belmont; again the rancher rose from his chair, only to be held in check by the gambler.

The wicked glitter in the latter's single eye showed that his anger was roused to a desperate pitch. Yet, his voice was soft and purring when he spoke, saying:

"Your suspicions are ill-grounded, John Brown—your threats foolish. Time will prove as much to you. Let us finish this business."

Brown laughed shortly. For some little time the trio talked quietly, and mutual good will seemed fully restored.

Then Spanish John drew a cigar case from his pocket, and passed it to his companions.

Both men accepted cigars. The gambler took one himself, closed the case and returned it to his pocket.

"I trust the matter is now fully settled," he remarked, when he had secured a light. "We understand each other, at last, and I am sure no one will attempt any double dealing."

"Quite sure," Brown declared. "Do you know, gentlemen, what I had determined to do if I found you playing me false?"

"No."

"Prove Ruby Ranger my daughter!"

Despite his iron nerve, Spanish John changed color at that significant declaration, and started sharply. But the question forming upon his tongue was not uttered.

A terrible change had suddenly come over John Brown. He staggered blindly. His eyes rolled in their sockets, and his face was horribly distorted.

A peculiar look flashed across the gambler's visage. Leaping lightly past his astounded ally, he softly closed and secured the door.

"Silence!" he hissed, when Belmont would have spoken. "Take your stand beside this door, and note if any one approaches."

The rancher mutely obeyed.

In another breath, Spanish John seized the unfortunate traveler and laid him on his back on the floor. Brown attempted to speak, but the words died in an inarticulate murmur. Then a shiver ran through his form, and he lay quite still.

With deft fingers, the gambler emptied the traveler's pockets. A small sum of money and a number of important-looking documents were brought to light. The money Spanish John returned; the papers, he hastily secured about his clothing.

The single eye gleamed and glittered evilly; the dark face betrayed both triumph and disappointment. There was just a trace of hesitancy, then the long and supple fingers passed quickly over the moribund in search of his money-belt. It required but a moment to locate it, and in another minute it was in the gambler's possession.

Then, at a sign from his ally, the rancher threw open the door, and both lifted their voices in cries of alarm, quickly drawing Burton King to the camp-house.

A few words from the plotters explained matters to the liveryman's satisfaction.

"It is heart disease, I think," Spanish John observed. "A doctor can do little good, I fear, but we'll send one at once."

"Come, Rupert. Let's hurry."

With that, the allies departed. On their way to the Silver Shades, they stopped long enough to notify a physician.

"What did it?" the rancher demanded, when they were again in the room above the saloon.

"Heart disease, or something of that sort."

"I feared—"

"What?"

"Poison!"

Spanish John shrugged his shoulders. He laughed carelessly.

"Fudge!" he exclaimed. "How could I have poisoned the man?"

"The cigar. I suspected—"

"Drop your suspicions! You took one; so did I. Brown selected his at random. He is dead; we live. In the words of our itinerant friend, the gospel sharp, let us call it a mysterious dispensation of Providence, and quit that phase of the subject. There are now other matters demanding our attention."

The subtle gleam in the gambler's eye did not escape the rancher. But he had learned to fear his ally, so bent his head in acquiescence.

"That is true," he rejoined. "We must now prepare to seize the girl."

"Yes; our original plans are knocked into a cocked hat by Brown's death."

"We can abduct her."

"No, we dare not hazard that, just yet, even in this half-lawless country. Leave it to me. I will evolve a plan before I sleep."

At that moment, a brisk step sounded just beyond the door. Spanish John started to his feet expectantly. Then came a sharp knock.

"Enter!"

The door opened, and a short, heavily-built, roughly-dressed man stepped into the room.

"Ha! Noolan, it is you!" the gambler ejaculated. "You bring news from the Cimarron!"

"Yas, boss," was the deep-voiced reply. "We've caught ther old man himself."

"Not Duncan?"

"Yas, Major Duncan!"

CHAPTER V.

ZEBULON PEGGS.

Burton King certainly had not departed from the truth in characterizing Ruby Ranger as beautiful and good. She was a shy, unassuming girl, petite of form, and a pronounced brunette.

Old Zebulon Peggs had a daughter, seemingly a year or so older than Ruby, a bright, sparkling creature, slender and graceful, with brown hair, black eyes, and almost faultless features and complexion.

The two maidens, both young and guileless, seemed drawn to each other by a mysterious, but powerful influence, and in the few hours they had been thrown together mere acquaintance deepened into warm friendship.

Zebulon Peggs looked on with an approving eye. We say eye, because, like Spanish John, the humble cobbler had lost an optic. Moreover, he had a wooden leg. As he was a man of unusual girth, this artificial member was at times the innocent cause of much trouble.

The Peggs domicile stood a short distance out of town. In common with the greater number of residences in and around Tiptop City, it consisted of two rooms—a box house sixteen feet square, with a shed kitchen in the rear.

On the morning following John Brown's arrival in town, the cobbler sat at his bench in a corner of the front room, pegging a boot. The two girls were seated near, chattering away, and the veteran was giving more attention to their talk than to the work in hand.

The death of John Brown and its effect upon Ruby's future was the topic under discussion.

"Really, I don't know what I shall do," Ruby declared, in reply to a question from Polly Peggs. "As I have told you, the man always claimed that I had been bound out to him when very young, and—"

"Thar, Now! Hev ye ever seen ther papers?" interjected Peggs, suddenly laying down his work and bending forward.

"Ther bind-out papers, I mean. 'Tisn't Zebulon Peggs ter speak ill o' the dead, but mebbe Brown hed no slch dockymints!"

Ruby shook her head.

"I never saw the papers, Mr. Peggs, but I believe they exist. Mrs. Brown first explained the matter to me, and as she was a good, true woman, I have no reason to doubt her statement now."

"Ay! ay! But ef ther papers can't be found, then Ruby, ye are a free gal, mebbe."

"How old be ye now?"

"Sixteen."

"An' bound till eighteen, ye said?"

"Yes, sir."

"Two years yet!" Peggs pursed up his grizzled face. His single eye beamed compassionately at the girl. "A long time. Vum! Its a dangnation—"

"Pop!"

Polly Peggs interjected the homely appellative with crisp energy. Her shapely foot stamped the rough floor by way of emphasis.

"I forgot," humbly apologized Peggs. "I meant 'twas a mighty bad law. Next thing ter bein' a slave. I reckon Brown's heirs or assigns will be after Ruby."

"They shan't have her. Now that Brown is dead, she shall stay with us, Pop."

"Shore, an' welcome, on'y for ther law."

"The law—fiddlesticks! What's it got to do with it?"

"Everything. Ther law is supreme, an' must be upheld. Do ye hear?—upheld! Be keerful, young lady, an' more respectful, or it'll putt a kweetus on your owdashus expirations."

Peggs spoke sharply, and his eye gleamed with unwonted severity.

"Quietus on my audacious aspirations, you mean, dear Pop, don't you?" asked Polly, meekly.

"Jest what I said! Vum! I've fit an' bled fer ther law, an' I'd do et ag'in. I kerry a monymint ter my valor—I do!"

At that point, the veteran pounded the floor with his wooden leg. His gaze rested reverently on a rusty army musket, with bayonet attached, hanging on the wall above the door.

"Thar is an instrument o' ther law," pointing to the relic. "In my humble hands, it hes mowed hull platoons o' ther enemy. It kin do it ag'in. You understand dear children, thet Zebulon Peggs upholds ther law?"

"Yes, Pop."

"Certainly, Mr. Peggs."

"Now we begin ter understand each other," pursued the veteran, nodding sagely. "Of course, I'm goin' ter help Ruby. 'Tain't in law thet I sh'd let any one oppress a young critter like her, an' I'm goin' ter see about it."

"Whar's mommy?"

"She's up town."

The answer seemed satisfactory to the veteran. Rising from the bench, he stumped out of the room and into the kitchen.

"It's 'forty winks,'" whispered Polly, shielding her pretty mouth with her hand.

Ruby seemed puzzled.

"I don't understand," she confessed.

"'Tarant'ler juice'—whisky."

"Oh!"

"Yes. Poor Pop! He's a dear soul, but like the rest of us he's got his failings. If Mommy were here that jug wouldn't be going 'gug-gug-gug' right now. No indeed!"

"Now, I can tell you just what will happen. Pop will come back in a minute or two. His face will look a bit redder, and his eye will shine. He'll take down the old musket and go through his 'bayonet drill.'"

"What's that?"

"Wait and see. I only mentioned it so you'd not be frightened by any war-like demonstration."

In some little alarm, Ruby nestled closer to her friend.

At that moment, Peggs re-entered the

room, closely followed by a mongrel dog. A glance showed Ruby that Polly's prediction as to the veteran's face and eye was literally true.

Stopping in the centre of the room, he stretched out his arms.

"Vum! My old bones are gettin' dang—eh?"

"For shame, pop!"

"Don't ye observate on yer parent's indiscussions, young lady. 'Tain't respectable. As I was about ter remark, my old bones are gettin' stiff. They needs exercise. I'll drill a while."

"Well, do be careful, pop. You forget that Ruby isn't used to your ways."

"Shore! But no one need be alarmed. I know my business!"

With that, Peggs pushed a table against the wall. Upon it he placed a short, heavy board, on which was chalked a small circle.

"That's his target," explained Polly, in a whisper.

"Get away, Bounce," grumbled the veteran, tripping over the dog as he started toward the door to take down the musket. "You're al'ays in the way. Git out!"

The dog sullenly retreated beneath a bed in the corner. Then Peggs swung the musket off the hooks supporting it, and patted it affectionately.

"An old friend o' mine," he assured Ruby. "Tergether, we've upheld ther law; tergether, we kin do it ag'in."

An expressive wink accompanied this declaration; then, when the girls had retreated to the work-bench, the "drill" began.

It consisted of a series of awkwardly performed movements, somewhat similar to those prescribed by the military code, interspersed with charges across the room and savage bayonet thrusts at the target on the inoffensive board.

In the midst of the uproar thus occasioned, the front door was suddenly flung open, and Spanish John stepped into the room.

At sight of the intruder, Bounce uttered a sullen growl, and darted from beneath the bed. Unfortunately, he collided with his master, bringing the veteran down with a crash. The jar exploded the musket, and with its resounding boom all became dire confusion.

CHAPTER VI.

SPANISH JOHN SHOWS HIS HAND.

"Bagonets an' bullets! I'm murdered!" wailed Zebulon Peggs, struggling frantically under cover of the cloud of dust and smoke raised by the double accident. "Lend a hand, some o' ye! Shore, now, I'm bleedin' ter death!"

This cry aroused both Polly and Ruby from their momentary stupefaction, and both sprang to the veteran's assistance. A prolonged pull put him upon his feet, and then it was found that no material damage had been done, the charge from the musket having passed through the open door, to find lodgment in the bole of a tree near by.

Peggs looked around in a bewildered manner, and groaned dolefully.

The gambler uttered a grating laugh.

"Peggs, you are a scoundrel—an infernal scoundrel!" he declared, viciously. "You have attempted my life!"

That charge at once cleared the veteran's brain, and turned his confusion to wrath. He pursed his lips and whistled sharply.

"Vum! You're a dinged prevaricide!" he exploded. "Why should I kill you?"

"For revenge!"

"For revenge?"

"Exactly. I killed Tom."

Peggs's florid face grew white.

"So ye did! You shot my boy!" he thundered. "Wretch, you shall hang for that crime! Bagonets an' bullets!—yes!"

"Don't, pop!" pleaded Polly, clinging to the enraged veteran in an agony of fear. "Please don't! He may shoot you!"

"Yes, do keep quiet, Mr. Peggs," Ruby added, fairly quivering with terror as she noted the look in Spanish John's blinking black optic. "He is a terrible wretch."

"You, too, eh?" sneered the gambler, turning his gaze upon the girl. "Well, you keep quiet. Do you hear? Know this: When I order, you obey, or 'twill be the worse for you!"

Ruby Ranger drew herself proudly erect, and her dark eyes sparkled scornfully. From her curling lips came the retort:

"Sir! You forget yourself. You presume upon my friendless condition, when you address me so. You—"

"Little 'un, you got friends," interrupted Peggs, hoarsely. "Thar's me, an' Polly an' Mommy. Ef ther three o' us can't outfight or outwit thet one-eyed thief, we're no good. That's all!"

Spanish John turned upon the cobbler.

"Mr. Peggs, I warn you not to incite this girl into rebellion against my authority," he explained, coldly. "Mark you: I am in deadly earnest."

"Don't keer a dinged cent fer yer authority! I've al'ays upheld ther law; I've even fit ter uphold it. Now, ther law's got ter uphold Peggs. It says every man's house is his castle, an' it's his right to defend it. Ther gal's in my castle, an' thet makes me her lawful protective."

As he finished speaking, the veteran suddenly flung both girls aside, and caught up the musket. Before his intention could be divined, the sharp point of the bayonet was pressed to the gambler's breast.

"Han's up—you!" hissed Peggs, his eye gleaming with vengeful fury.

Spanish John shrank back in alarm, and promptly obeyed, muttering:

"Have a care, Zebulon Peggs! I warn you to go slowly. I am here in the name of the law."

"In ther name o' ther law, eh? What-fer game—"

"You are harboring this girl, Ruby Ranger. She is lawfully indentured to me, and I demand immediate possession of her."

A thunderbolt could hardly have created greater consternation among the trio. A glassy look came into Peggs's eye, and his mouth opened until his double chin rested upon his breast.

Shivering with dread, Ruby uttered a faint cry and sank half-fainting upon a stool.

Polly was the only one of the three whose faculties remained unshaken.

"I think that is a deliberate falsehood!" she exclaimed, abruptly.

"You do, eh?"

"Yes, sir; I do. Ruby was bound out to the dead man, John Brown, and not to you."

"You are mistaken there, Pretty Polly. I took Ruby Ranger from the poor-house ten years ago; she was legally bound out to me. My circumstances changed, and I placed her in Brown's keeping. Brown brought her here on my demand. Hired help is very scarce now, and a spry girl like her is worth a hundred dollars a year on any of the farms or ranches around Tiptop. She has two years to serve yet, and I would be a fool to lose the two hundred dollars she can earn, when it is legally mine."

"You're a brute!" snapped Polly.

"Vum! Yas—a cold-blooded scoundrel!" supplemented Peggs. "A mis-abul, soullers, two-penny scorpion! Bagonets an' bullets! I've a notion ter jab ye once, fer luck!"

"Silence! I am ready to prove my words. I have the document here."

"Projuce! Ther law must be upheld."

So saying, the veteran grounded his musket and extended his hand.

"Easy, my friend! You must pledge yourself not to mutilate or destroy the documents."

"I shore won't hurt 'em."

"Very good. Examine at your leisure,"

and the gambler thrust a number of folded papers into the waiting hand.

It required but a moment's inspection of the documents to convince Peggs that Spanish John's assertions were absolutely true. The papers were made out in due form, and, so far as the veteran could determine, there was not a single loop-hole through which Ruby might hope to escape!

"I reckon ye called ther turn, John Barford," he reluctantly admitted, returning the papers.

"You yield the girl, then?"

"I ain't got ther gal. She's hyar of her own sweet will, an' hyar she kin stay fer all o' you."

"But the law—"

"I'm upholdin' ther law right now. You got no license ter come in ter my house. Without a writ, you cain't take even a jack rabbit off my place, let alone a human bein'. I'm jedge an' jury under my own roof, John Barford, an' my verdict is—you skip quick!"

Peggs's wheezy old voice betrayed fierce anger. A deft movement had brought the bayonet point fairly against the gambler's breast once more, and Spanish John realized that the case was hopeless, just then.

A dark scowl crossed his face, and his single eye flashed wickedly.

"You'll rue this, Zeb Peggs!" he hissed, brandishing his clenched hand. Then with a bound he cleared the door sill and hurried away.

"Vum! But I'd 'a' liked ter 'a' jobbed ther mis'abul scorpion!" grumbled Peggs. "Ef it hadn't bin fer upholdin' ther law, I'd a settled fer pore Tom's death, instanter."

The veteran put down his musket, and closed and bolted the door. Then he started toward the kitchen.

Polly quickly barred the way.

"Don't, pop—please don't," she pleaded, catching his hand. "Let it alone, won't you? You've behaved grandly in putting that ugly wretch to rout. Now don't spoil—"

"Young lady, hev a keer! Ther enemy ter ther fore's in full retreat, but ther enemy ter ther rear must be looked to. Stand aside!"

Polly uttered a slight cry of alarm.

"Surely, pop, you don't think—"

"But I does think!" tersely interrupted the veteran, stumping on into the kitchen. "Keep a lookout in front, you gals."

Glancing quickly around the kitchen, Peggs advanced to a bed in the corner, and drew a jug from beneath it. Then he opened a door and passed into the yard.

A huge boulder lay near at hand. Raising the jug aloft, the veteran hurled it against the massive stone. With a crash, the vessel broke into a hundred pieces, while the amber-hued liquor sank quickly into the dry earth.

"Thar!" he muttered, grimly mopping his face. "I've 'listed fer ther fight, an' no matter what comes no one can say Zebulon Peggs was drunk when it happened!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE DETECTIVE.

Returning to the house, the veteran hunted up some powder and buckshot, and at once recharged the musket.

"Cain't tell what's goin' ter happen," he informed the trembling girls. "John Barford may come back, an' he may not."

"Don't get into trouble for me, Mr. Peggs," Ruby Ranger urged. "While I feel that there is a terrible mistake somewhere—that that man has no legal claim upon me, yet it is not right that I should involve you in any further difficulty, with him."

"You keep still, young lady! If thar's any defickelty, it's o' my own makin', not yours. I owe him one for Tom's death. Vum! I hates that yaller scorpion!"

"So do I," avowed Polly. "He is a

cold-blooded, heartless wretch, and poor Tom's blood is certainly upon his hands."

The girl's face clouded, and a sigh parted her lips. After a moment's silence, she turned to Ruby and explained:

"Tom was my brother, several years older than I. He was killed during an altercation over a claim by this John Barford. There was but one witness—a man named Rupert Belmont, and he swore that Tom was the aggressor. After the trial, the disputed claim passed from Barford to Belmont, and we have always believed that he swore falsely—that Tom was murdered in cold blood."

"That he was!" Peggs asseverated. "An' Barford shall yet hang fer it—mark thet!"

Ruby shuddered.

Shortly thereafter, Mommy Peggs returned. Like her liege, she was of corpulent build, and her round English face and twinkling blue eyes beamed with good nature and motherly kindness.

"You don't need to be hafeared, dear 'art," she assured Ruby, in an asthmatic voice, when she had been duly apprised of Spanish John's visit and its result. "Poppy Peggs 'ill stand like ha bulwark between you an' that riptile. Just you stay right 'ere, han hit'll come 'round hall right."

Ruby, though far from being at ease, smilingly thanked the kindly matron. Then she protested against remaining and causing further trouble or annoyance.

In the midst of the animated discussion brought up by this objection, a sharp knock sounded at the door, bringing an oppressive silence over all.

"Kin it be thet soulless riptile ag'in?" muttered Peggs, with lowering brow, after a moment's listening. "Vum! Ef 'tis, I'll bagonet—"

"It's a stranger, pop—a gentleman at that," Polly interjected, glancing through the window. "Open the door, now, and act civilized."

Peggs hastily obeyed and the next minute the visitor entered the room.

A tall, well-made, elegantly-dressed young man, he proved to be. His face, while handsome, was stern and fearless.

In the moment he remained standing ere waved to a seat by the cobbler, his keen blue-gray eyes glanced restlessly over his surroundings.

"Wal?" from the host.

"You are Mr. Zebulon Peggs, I believe?"

"Yas, sir."

"Well, Mr. Peggs, I am Gilbert Goldspur, detective. I've called to obtain an interview with a Miss Ranger, who, I understand, is stopping with you."

The detective looked inquiringly at the two girls.

"Vum—!"

"Sir, it is I you seek," Ruby informed, agitatedly.

"Keep still, young lady!" growled Peggs, with a prodigious frown. Then he turned savagely to his visitor.

"You come f'm John Barford, I per-soom?"

"On the contrary, I represent Major Duncan."

"Major Duncan?"

"Yes, sir."

"An' who's ther major?"

"The major, sir, I have every reason to believe, is Miss Ranger's father."

Peggs's mouth opened, and he closed his single eye reflectively. Evidences of surprise also appeared on the faces of the detective's other auditors.

"Major Duncan lost a child, ten years ago," Goldspur proceeded. "A daughter, Ruby, six years old. She was stolen by a one-eyed scamp named Barmillo. In Denver, this Barmillo, we believe, transferred the child to one John Brown, at that time known as Esau Black, and then disappeared. There is a gap in the evidence at this point which we have not been able to fill; but we believe that John Barford is Barmillo, and that Ruby Ranger is Duncan's daughter."

"Aw—hum!" Peggs gasped spasmodically. His florid face had become livid, and he tore frantically at the folds of fat

encasing his throat. Then he staggered from his seat, and fell with a crash to the floor.

Mommy Peggs, not a whit less pallid, uttered a faint cry, and wrung her pudgy hands.

"Hopperplexy!" she moaned. "Pore, dear man—hexcitement's bin too much fer 'im! Hoh, 'eavens!"

The girls, too, were terribly alarmed. Of the group, Goldspur alone retained full possession of his faculties. He bent quickly over the cobbler.

Happily, the attack was slight. Vigorous measures restored consciousness in a moment, and Peggs rose to a sitting posture, whence he was helped to his feet by the detective.

"You are better," Goldspur said.

The veteran shivered violently.

"Y—yas. You kin talk ter ther gal. I'm goin' ter lay down till I feels better. "Mommy, help me."

Dutifully, Mommy Peggs stepped to her husband's side, and led him from the room. In the kitchen, the cobbler lay down upon the bed in a corner. His face at that moment was a study, and his eye gleamed oddly. Catching his spouse's head in his hands, he forced an ear close to his lips, and hissed:

"Hear all—remember all!"

Repressing her amazement, Mommy nodded, and silently returned to the front room, where she sat through Goldspur's interview with Ruby Ranger.

Nothing new to the reader was developed, and at the end of a half-hour the detective departed.

As previously noted, it was an election day, and the town was thronged. With a glance at the distant crowd, Goldspur turned into the trail leading westward along the crest of the divide. A short distance out of town, he quitted the road and entered a timber slashing. Just ahead was a dense clump of second-growth oak. As the detective neared it, the dead leaves rustled sharply, and a boy stepped into view, gun in hand.

It was Gimps.

"Hallo!" greeted Goldspur. "You are prompt, my lad."

"Like time an' tide, perfessor, on'y I waits fer a man. But, say! I've got ther news!"

"They're goin' ter raffle ther gal!"

"Eh?"

"Jest what I said, boss, an' I'm in on ther deal, too. Spanish John scented trouble 'ith Peggs, an' laid out ther hull scheme last night, ter hev et ready. See?"

"No, Gimps, I don't see. Explain."

"Wal, perfessor, et's smooth es eels. One-Eye hes a wheel o' fortune. Et's sot on legs, an' hes a crank like a grindstun. Ther round box hes a partition acrost ther middle, cuttin' et in two, an' each side hes a little slide door, ter draw from. Ther side holdin' numbers is painted red, ther one with blanks an' ther prize slip, blue. Do ye foller?"

"Yes; at every complete revolution of the wheel, there is a number and a blank drawn."

"Jes' so. Wal, thar's two hundred tickets, at dollar a number. Now, two hundred numbers ter match ther tickets will be put in ther red hafe o' ther wheel, and a hundred an' ninety-nine blanks an' ther prize slip in ther blue side. Do ye ketch, perfessor?"

"Decidedly, Gimps. Proceed."

"Ther drawin' will take place in public after ther races this afternoon, an' I'm ter do ther drawin'. At a word from Spanish John, I'm ter slip my hand inter a cute little pocket made o' glue an' muslin, in ther red side, an' pull out No. 99. Then, when ther wheel turns blue side up, I'm ter get ther prize slip out o' ther same kind o' pocket, an' Rupert Belmont will win the gal."

Goldspur nodded quickly.

"You have done well, Gimps," he declared. Then, after a moment's reflection, he asked:

"Where is the wheel?"

"Above ther Silver Shades."

"You have access to it?"

"No, perfessor. Like ther Zebra, I'm barred."

Again Goldspur reflected. Presently an idea came to him, and he addressed his youthful ally at some length, in a low tone.

Gimps nodded comprehensively, and his eyes sparkled.

"I'll do et, perfessor," he declared, and the next minute was lost to sight in the undergrowth.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PARDS.

Burton King's eyes opened wide with horror and incredulity when he heard Redrock's damaging charge against Belmont and the gambler.

He caught his breath sharply, and shivered. Then he suddenly shrank back, pointing to a figure in the doorway.

The newcomer was Pawnee Bill, the quarter-blood. A peculiar sparkle in his dark eyes told that he had heard the accusation, and he nodded quickly as he met Redrock's glance.

"Hollo, chief!" the sport greeted, grasping Pawnee's hand. "You heard?"

"Yes, all. But—can we prove Brown was poisoned?"

"I think so. A secret autopsy will tell."

"Can that be arranged?"

"Ther man's ter be buried this evenin'," interjected King, uneasily.

"How soon?"

"Just as soon as ther coffin's done. Spanish John arranged for me ter do the job."

For a moment Redrock seemed lost in thought. Ere he could frame the query he was about to put, a heavy trampling sounded without, and two men appeared at the threshold, bearing a long, rudely-fashioned box.

"Hyar's yer sarcophagus," the foremost announced.

"Right in hyar, boys," King requested, and in another minute the coffin rested on the floor beside the corpse.

The liveryman settled with the pair, and they at once departed.

"King!"

"Wal, Mr. Redrock?"

"Brown must not be buried at present."

"Lordy, pard! Ye're goin' ter get me inter trouble!"

"No danger."

"I tell ye, delay will shore get me in a fuss with Spanish John."

"I'll pertect ye."

"You?"

"So I said, sir," and Redrock's voice rang out sharply. "Ef thar's been murder done, it must be avenged."

King nodded reluctantly.

"Right, but et's on'y s'picion yet."

"With an autopsy, s'picion will become sartinty. We must work secretly, an' hoodwink Spanish John."

"Kin we do et?"

"With your help, yas."

"But, thar's ther kink! I—"

"You shall help," interpolated Pawnee Bill, sternly, and quickly stepping forward he exposed a metallic badge.

"A Deputy United States Marshal!" gasped the liveryman.

"Exactly! Have a care you do not become a party to this crime, Burton King."

"What ye want me ter do?"

"First, to keep a still tongue."

"Lordy! I'm no woman, boss, but—"

A commanding gesture stopped him. Then in a few words, Pawnee outlined a plan.

"I reckon I'll hev ter do et," groaned King. "Ef Spanish John ever finds out, though, he'll shore plug me!"

"Yes, upon your silence depends your safety."

"But why don't ye seize ther body, deputy? Thet w'u'd let me out."

"Because these miscreants have a deep game afoot, and we do not care to alarm them, just yet."

"Ther poisonin' o' Brown is on'y one

sarcumstance o' ther case," supplemented Redrock.

Soon thereafter the pards withdrew, leaving the mystified liveryman alone with the dead.

A short distance from the camp-house they entered an abandoned shanty, to compare notes.

"Goldspur, things are coming to a pinch," Pawnee Bill informed. "These miscreants are determined to possess the girl. It seems she was bound to Spanish John, not Brown."

"So it appears. Have you seen Gimps?"

"He came to me this morning."

"And the ticket?"

"I secured it—No. 66. But I do not understand the move."

The disguised detective laughed.

"It will all be clear presently, when the drawing occurs."

"A trick?"

"Yes. It will give Spanish John something to think about."

"But I am growing alarmed at Major Duncan's non-arrival. He should have been here ere this."

"I'll go over to the Cimarron to-night," volunteered Pawnee. "He was to come by way of P—, and by inquiry there I may learn something."

"And about the girl, Goldspur. If No. 66 wins—"

"Leave her with Peggs for the present. I'll see her as soon as possible after the result of the drawing is known."

"Keep an eye on the gambler. When the wheel is turned, I'll be near, to give you aid if you need it."

Pawnee Bill nodded, and withdrew. A careful reconnaissance disclosed no one loitering in the vicinity of the shanty, and he hastened toward the crowd surrounding the distant platform.

Let us return, now, to the moment when Spanish John quitted the house of Zebulon Peggs.

His face was beclouded with rage and chagrin, and there was something tigerish in his movements as he glided, rather than walked, toward the Silver Shades.

In the den above stairs Rupert Belmont patiently awaited his coming.

Looking neither to the right nor to the left, the gambler quickly entered and passed through the resort, ascended the stairs and confronted his ally.

Belmont sprang to his feet.

"What is it, man?" he demanded, nervously.

"Defeat!"

"Peggs—"

"Defied me, as did the girl. Satan take them! I'll have revenge!"

"This forces us to use the wheel?"

"It does; and lucky it is we fixed that scheme last night."

"Peggs will refuse to give her up."

"Not to a woman of your sister's character and standing."

"There's the rub! My sister may refuse to act—to receive the girl."

A sneer curled the gambler's thin lips.

"Not she, if you explain the matter properly. Being of the sickly, Christian sort, she'll go to any length to shelter and protect the walf."

"That is true, Barford. And that view of the case had escaped me. Let us drop the matter where it is, and I'll have my sister act."

"No! The girl must go on the wheel!"

"Think of the danger—the publicity!"

"No matter. I hate her—I hate her father! 'Twill humiliate her now—her father later. Raffled like an ox or a horse! Think of it!"

"The citizens may object."

"No! They dare not! Brown's papers, altered to suit the case, place the girl under my control for the next two years. The keenest eye in Tiptop can never detect the fraud, so all must admit that her labor is mine until she's of age."

"Granted, too."

"Well, there you have it! The good people in and around Tiptop, like your sister, will wink at the raffle, for through

it the girl passes from under my control. See?"

"If they take that view of it—yes."

"You must see that they do."

"By heavens! They shall see it so!"

CHAPTER IX.

RAFFLED.

The footrace between the quarter-blood and Luke Lightfoot, as described in the opening chapter of this romance, was followed by a series of similar contests, the final event being decided just before sundown.

Truly, it had been a lively day for the denizens of Tiptop—one of excitement, sport and carousal, and many of the strangers within the little settlement's limits declared it a wonderful place.

Following the judge's decision on the closing race, there came a confused murmur—then, a breathless, expectant hush.

Spanish John's single glittering black optic glanced sharply over the sea of upturned faces surrounding the platform. It was a bold, reckless, defiant look, not unlike the ferocious glare of a wild beast at bay; and many of the more timid ones felt a thrill akin to terror as their gaze wavered and fell beneath that deadly stare.

Then the gambler spoke. His voice was cold and even—each word distinctly enunciated. Briefly, he told his skillfully-concocted story and made known his purpose.

There was much of art, of consummate cunning, in that tersely-spoken address, with never a trace or tinge of fear. And, thanks to Rupert Belmont's specious and oft-repeated plea, no voice was lifted in open remonstrance.

The preliminaries were quickly arranged. Two or three men and the lad Gimps were called to the platform, to assist in the drawing. A canvas sheet concealing the wheel of fortune was swept aside, and the men glanced at the contents of the two compartments. Then the boy was blindfolded, and the drawing began.

The man on the left received and announced the numbers, as drawn; the one on the right, the blanks. Both passed their respective slips to a man in the rear, while Spanish John busied himself turning the wheel.

A feeling of deep and eager interest held the crowd silent, motionless.

"No. 23."

"Blank."

"K'rect!"

Thus rang the announcements of the tellers and the judge, until one hundred and thirty-two numbers had been drawn.

The crowd was growing restless. Faint mutterings began to be heard.

"'Tis a shame!" grumbled one.

"An outrage, sir!"

"No harm shall come to her!"

"No! I'll swear it!"

"And I!"

This breath from the rising storm reached Spanish John. He glanced curiously at the crowd, then gave Gimps the signal.

Again the wheel turned.

"No. 66!"

"Prize!"

"K'rect!"

The gambler started violently, and stifled an oath. A feeble cheer came from the throng, and a tall man pushed forward to the edge of the platform.

It was the quarter-blood.

"Sixty-six?" cried Spanish John. "Look again, gentlemen. Be sure you are right."

"Sixty-six she is," affirmed the judge. Pawnee Bill held aloft his ticket.

"I hold that number," he announced.

"You? Perdition!" and Spanish John recoiled in amazement and alarm.

"Yes, I, scoundrel!"

With that, the quarter-blood leaped nimbly upon the platform, and, ticket in hand, faced the crowd.

"Men of Tiptop," he cried; "you have seen the drawing, and you have seen that I hold the winning number. Now, that

Shylock has demanded and received his due, I wish to add just this:

"The ticket I hold was purchased for and belongs to Miss Ruby Ranger. With it she has won her freedom!"

A moment of profound silence followed this announcement. Then, as Pawnee dropped lightly to the ground, a tremendous cheer rose on the gathering twilight.

"A thousand curses be upon them!" gritted Spanish John. "Jim! Pete!—away with the wheel!"

The gambler turned his back to the crowd, and strode hastily to the rear of the platform, where he dropped to the ground and slipped away to the Silver Shades.

Belmont had preceded him. The rancher was utterly dazed by that seemingly inexplicable miscarriage of their plot, and awaited his ally's appearance in a sort of fevered stupor.

"Oh! you're here!" snarled the gambler, as he burst into the den. "Thick-head, do you know we are ruined?"

"I do not understand it."

"Certainly not!"

"Something went wrong."

"Decidedly!"

"The boy, I suspect."

The gambler smiled. But his curling lips and gleaming teeth expressed not mirth, but rage.

"The boy, eh?" he muttered. "Tell me what you suspect."

"He may have changed the numbers. We were fools to trust him. He is a stranger here—a nameless waif. Perhaps he is a spy."

"Oh! oh! Perhaps he is!"

"We were fools, I repeat. One of our old and trusty men should have done the drawing."

"The result would have been the same. Belmont, we have made a blunder. That is all!"

"I cannot believe it."

"It is simple. Sixty-six held upside down is ninety-nine. There you have it. The wrong number went into the pocket, and the wrong number came out."

Belmont started.

"A blunder, I say," repeated Spanish John.

"The girl had one chance in two hundred, and she won!" the rancher muttered.

"A stroke of fate!"

The two men looked at each other curiously.

"Strange! But we must watch the boy."

"Very queer! Yes, I'll keep an eye on him, Rupert. Do you the same."

"And the girl?"

"I must plot again. With father and daughter in our hands, we can bend them to our purpose. We must possess the Ten-Bar Ranch and Touchstone Mine."

Spanish John arose, and restlessly paced the floor. After a moment, he uttered a few words to the rancher, then turned and descended the stairs.

Lighting a cigar, Belmont lifted his heels to a corner of the table, and puffed away with the air of a man beclouded with perplexity. His eyes were half closed, and there was a scowl on his face.

The minutes slipped by unheeded, until Spanish John had been gone a half-hour. Then a firm tread sounded on the stairway, and the form of a man, with a sample case in hand, appeared in the doorway.

"Enter!" cried the rancher, taking down his feet.

"Mr. Belmont, I believe?"

"That is my name."

"Mine's K. K. Sparlock, representing Stilnaker & Meyerdrum, cigars and tobacco, K. C."

While speaking, the traveler had advanced to the table, where he put down and deftly opened the sample case.

"Got a full stock," Belmont gruffly informed. "Don't need a thing. Shut it up."

"Novelties?"

"Nothing!"

"Got a side line—something entirely new to the West—"

"Don't want it!"

Down went the voice to a whisper:

"Graduated knock-out drops for troublesome customers or fat purses. Insensibility from one to forty-eight hours, or death quick as 'scat'—just as you like! Leaves no trace—defies analysis—"

"Heavens! man, what ails you?"

Belmont, pale and trembling, had leaped to his feet.

"I—I—am violently ill."

"Shall I call for help?"

"No—leave me. I am subject—"

Snap! went the grip. With a sweeping bow, the traveler turned and departed.

On the stairway he passed Spanish John, who looked at him curiously.

"Belmont, who was that man?" asked the One-Eyed, a moment later.

The rancher shivered, and muttered:

"I'm not quite sure."

"Not, eh? Well, I'll tell you: He was Goldspur, the detective!"

CHAPTER X.

MOMMY PEGGS'S QUERY.

That sibilant and mysterious command from Zebulon Peggs to his wife made a deep and lasting impression on that poor creature.

"Hear all—remember all!"

These words, seemingly possessed of a dire and secret significance, lingered in the mind of Mommy.

What did they mean?

Why should Peggs have displayed such guilty weakness one moment—such intense interest the next?

Of what import was the detective's errand to him?

What knowledge or interest had he in Major Duncan, or the stolen child?

Pondering the matter, Mommy shook her head doubtfully, and muttered:

"Lawd, save 'im! 'Is 'art's hall right, Hi know, but there's su'thin' hon 'is 'ead. Hin the six years we've bin 'usband han' wife, 'is honly fault 'as bin ha cup too much hat times; but now—"

A sigh took the place of utterance, and her rolly-polly figure quivered like a huge jelly ball.

"'Is 'art's right, Hi know!"

Baffled by the perplexing problem, Mommy thus put it aside, and carefully obeyed the order.

There was not much that she could tell Peggs, beyond what he had already learned from the detective and Ruby Ranger; but he listened attentively to that little, and attempted to add to it by diligent questioning.

It may be remarked that Mommy was the cobbler's third wife.

Satisfied at length that he had received every scrap of information his wife could impart, the veteran rose to a sitting posture, and rested a moment on the side of the couch.

He was pale and visibly ill at ease. His single eye gazed furtively at the floor, and anon he ran the fingers of one hand through his scanty locks.

"Dear 'art, you look blue haround the gills," Mommy remarked. "You're hill. You need ha stimulant."

Peggs shook his head, and growled:

"Vum! Ther jug's smashed."

"Smashed?"

Rising, Peggs opened the door, pointed to the fragments, and groaned.

"'Art halive! W'ot did hit?"

"Hi did hit," in mimicry. Then he winked, and pointed over his shoulder.

"Ther gal was in danger."

Mommy caught her breath sharply. Her doubts vanished like mists under the summer sun.

"Blessed man!" she ejaculated.

Peggs looked mysterious, and stepped outside.

"Ding et all! we ain't out o' ther woods yet," he reminded. "I'm goin' away now. May not be back till nearly night. Keep ther doors locked, an' don't let any one in till I am hyar."

Too deeply impressed to question, Mommy nodded and closed the door. Peggs stood quite still until he heard the key click in the lock, then stealthily moved out of the yard.

It was nearly nightfall when Peggs returned. There was a stealthy, half-sinister expression on his round, red face, and he obstinately refused to meet any of the inquiring glances leveled at him.

Supper was eaten in gloomy silence. As soon as the meal was ended, the veteran loaded his pipe and puffed away in a slow and methodical manner. Suddenly, he leveled a sharp glance at Ruby, and said:

"Young lady, et's right an' proper ye sh'u'd go down ter ther camp-house an' see thet cawpse before et's planted, bein' as ther man done raised ye, an' raised ye well."

"I would like to go, Mr. Peggs, if—"

"No if's! Duty's duty, jest es law's law. Vum! yes! An' both must be upheld."

"I'll go with you, Ruby," cried Polly.

"No, ye don't!" asserted Peggs, stiffly.

"Yes I will!"

"I'll 'tend ter this hyar percession myse'f, Miss Rattlehead. You keep still. I don't want no rebellion. Bagonets an' bullets! no!"

"But I might go along, Pop."

"An' ag'in ye mightn't. See?"

Ruby rose.

"I'll be ready, Mr. Peggs, as soon as I put on my hat and cloak," she said.

"Wery good, young lady, on'y ye must go in disguise. Understand?—disguise. Jest ye take Polly's bonnet an' coat, an' ye'll slip right through ther enemy's lines."

Polly's vexation vanished in a burst of laughter.

"You dear, cunning old soul! I see, now," she exclaimed, dancing away after the articles in question.

Peggs uttered a smothered growl, and resumed his smoking.

A moment later Polly re-appeared, bearing a sunbonnet and a rough cloak, which she assisted Ruby in donning.

When these preparations were completed, the veteran knocked the ashes from his pipe, and took up his musket. The next minute, he and Ruby quitted the house.

Left to themselves, Mommy and Polly were occupied for some time with the ever-present household duties. These attended to, they entered the front room and sat down to await the return of the absent ones.

Then a thought suddenly occurred to Mrs. Peggs, and she lifted her pudgy hands and said:

"Hi bethinks there's not ha match hin the 'ouse for the mornin'."

"I'll go for some, Mommy."

"Make 'aste then, dearie."

Catching up Ruby's hat and cloak, Polly quickly enveloped herself and darted away.

Mrs. Peggs was a timid soul. Opening the door, she invited the dog Bounce into the house for company, then resumed her seat and patiently waited.

The minutes passed into an hour—the hour into hours, and no one came. Poor Mommy, not daring to move, sat silent and motionless, staring blankly at the wall, while the tears coursed slowly down her cheeks.

The clock on the shelf tolled the midnight hour. A moment later she heard Peggs's well known rap at the door.

When he entered, he was alone.

"Where's the girls?" asked Mommy, peering past him into the darkness.

"Ther gals? I dunno."

"But Ruby went with you!"

"She did."

"Where his she?"

"I dunno, I tell ye."

Peggs spoke sharply, then started guiltily, and slyly thrust his hand behind him.

But he was too late. A tell-tale stain thereon had caught Mommy's eye, driving

a frightful chill to her heart. Bravely, she quelled the feeling of terror that rose within her, and continued:

"Han' yer musket?"

"My musket?"

"Han' Polly?"

Peggs jumped, and drew his hand across his brow, like one dazed.

"Polly? Is she gone?"

"She went for matches. She's not come back."

Turning, the veteran clumsily dashed through the door and disappeared in the darkness.

Mommy carefully closed the door. Returning to her chair, she again faced the wall, and slowly wrung her hands.

"Dear 'art!" she moaned, her composure giving way. "Dear 'art! That blessed man a-snoopin'! Blood hon 'is 'ands—deceit hon 's tongue!"

"Hoh, 'eavens! Is Peggs h2 villain?"

Let the reader judge.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OLD RANCH HOUSE.

A few miles out of Tiptop, in the valley of one of those small streams with which that portion of Oklahoma lying between the Cimarron and Deep Fork Rivers abounds, stood an old ranch house, said to be haunted.

This structure was about sixteen by fifty feet, two stories in height, and strongly built of hewn logs. At regular intervals loop-holes pierced the thick walls. Heavy shutters covered the windows. The ponderous doors were of seasoned oak, thickly studded with wrought nails. These doors were terribly scarred, and bore the marks of more than one savage foray.

The ranch house stood on the crest of a small rise, just within an Indian allotment, and about a mile off the old trail running east from Fort Reno and Guthrie. For two hundred yards around, every tree had been cut away, save one—a beautiful elm, standing within a few paces of the west end of the building. Along the western extremity of the glade ran the creek, bordered with clumps of overhanging bushes, stretches of sand and huge tufts of grass. Here lurked hideous reptiles, the creeping centipede, the frightful tarantula.

About two o'clock in the afternoon of the eventful day of which we have been writing, a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by a large white mule came to a stop in the shadows of the dense timber bordering the eastern side of the glade. The driver raised himself in the seat and narrowly scanned his surroundings, then with an approving chuckle descended and tethered the animal.

This man was Zebulon Peggs.

Sweat stood in beads upon his florid brow. He moved like a hunted man, and a gleam of stealthy cunning shone from his single eye.

After a moment, he took a well-filled grain sack from the vehicle, placed it upon his shoulder, and stumped on to the house.

The scarred and battered door was ajar. He silently entered, and put down his sack, to look around.

If the exterior of the old ranch house was gloomy and forbidding, the interior was dark and chilling. The sashes, denuded of glass by vandal hands, were covered with rough boards, and the dust of disuse lay thick on the floor. A serpent near the wall regarded the intruder curiously, then clumsily coiled, and sent forth its warning rattle.

Peggs drew his sleeve across his brow, and shivered. Suddenly seeing a bit of board standing near, he started toward the reptile; but crotalus, not to be slaughtered, hastily uncoiled and wriggled away, disappearing through the doorway of an adjoining room.

With the board upraised, the veteran plunged forward in pursuit, only to stop in horrified amazement when he had entered the second apartment.

This apartment was in the east end of the house. Some of the lower logs had

rotted through, and the chinking had fallen out. The air was heavy with a peculiar odor. On the floor lay, not one serpent, not a score, but a hundred!

Zebulon Peggs retreated, and hastily closed and fastened the door.

"I w'u'dn't venture into that room ag'in' fer no deesideration!" he muttered, shuddering.

Then with lips pursed and eye keenly alert, he explored the west room, and ascended to the upper floor.

Wherever he went, over all lay the dust of desolation. His face paled with the thoughts stirring within him, and his manner became hesitant.

The last place to receive his attention was an attic, or loft, extending the full length of the building, and reached by a ladder fastened against the inside of the east wall of the house.

It was with no little difficulty that Peggs ascended to this attic, for in addition to his handicap of a wooden leg, he was burdened with flesh; but he finally succeeded, and seemed well repaid for his exertions, for he uttered a delighted chuckle as he gazed around.

What he saw was simply a long, low loft, dimly lighted by a single sash in the western gable. Here, as everywhere in that ill-fated place, the dust lay deep on the rough floor, while cobwebs hung in innumerable graceful festoons from the stout oaken rafters.

"Ther very cage fer ther bird," he muttered. "Now, I'll git up ther sack an' things. Vum!—yas. Et's time."

The descent was less laborious than the ascent had been, but more painful, inasmuch as Peggs lost his footing and fell with a crash; but he nimbly gathered himself and limped away.

In due course, the sack was brought up, raised above his head and gently rolled into the loft. It was followed by a number of bulky packages taken from the body of the waiting vehicle.

Then the veteran carefully closed the outer door, and departed.

Leaving the ranch house thus, let us return to the Peggs domicile, and follow Ruby Ranger.

At the moment the girl ventured forth, accompanied by her armed escort, the cobbler, night had fallen, and it was some little time before she could distinguish objects in the faint starlight; but Peggs, although equally short sighted for the time being, was thoroughly familiar with the course he wished to take, and hurried the maiden along until beyond earshot of the house.

There, he stopped.

"Now, Miss Ruby, we'll git shut o' this hyar hocus-pocus," he announced, in a hoarse whisper. "Ther fact is, ye're in danger back thar, an' after a deal o' sagitatin' I detarmined ter git ye away f'm thar 'thout alarmin' ther wimmin folks. Then, when Spanish John tarns up, ye'll be missin', an', nacherly, he won't be able ter lay han's on ye."

"You apprehend trouble, then?"

"Shore! But don't bother yer head. I've gone an' fixed a hidin' place, with grub ter last a week, blankets, an' sich—"

"But the detective and Major Duncan—"

"I'll 'tend ter them," doggedly. "Thet is, ef thar's any sich critter es ther major—which same I doubts!"

"Surely—"

"Thar's nothin' shore on earth, gal, but death an' taxes. Et's 'most cinched, tho', ther detective's playin' in with Spanish John fer ter git a grip on ye. Min' yer Uncle Zeb now, ef ye're in airnest ter git away; ef ye don't—wal, I shore cain't help et, nohow!"

"Ye see, ye come a pore, 'fenseless critter, an' I've felt juty-boun' ter stan' up fer ye. O' course, tho', ef ye jest will—"

"Oh, I'll go, Mr. Peggs," Ruby quickly assured, her scruples completely routed by that wheedling, half-indignant strain. "Anywhere—anywhere, so I escape that hideous wretch! And I do thank ye with all my heart for your loyalty to poor, defenseless me."

"At's more like et," grumbled the veteran, the darkness hiding the crafty gleam in his single eye. "Now, I've got a rig hitched over hyar, all ready, an' will git in an' go at once."

Ruby Ranger bowed her head in acquiescence. A moment later both were seated in the two-wheeled vehicle we have seen in the woods by the old ranch house, and the lights of Tiptop began to fade from view.

There was no moon, and the trail was rough; yet, Peggs drove at a rapid pace, with a certitude betraying an intimate knowledge of the route, and in a little less than two hours drew up in front of the old house.

Clambering out of the vehicle, he threw the reins over a shrub, took out a bucket and cup, and assisted Ruby to alight.

Inside the house, he closed the door, and lit a candle. Then he pointed to the door of the east room, and said:

"On no account open that door. Leave et shut an' fastened as ye see et. Thar's danger in thar. Mebbe death."

Next he led the way into the west room, where he lifted a trap, revealing a neatly walled spring at the bottom of a flight of stone steps. Here he filled the bucket, and they proceeded to the second floor.

"Ye'll stay up thar," he announced, indicating the loft with an upward jerk of his thumb. "Ye'll find blankets, grub, books an' can'les thar. When ye use a light, hang su'thin' over ther window. Ef water runs out afore I gits back, ye know whar ter git more. But don't come down oftener'n ye hev to, an' keep away f'm that east room."

"Kin ye use a gun?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then I'll leave ther musket. Thar's no danger, I reckon, but ye'll feel safer with et."

Then Ruby ascended the ladder, and Peggs handed up the water and the candle, and departed to secure the gun.

On his return the veteran handed the girl the weapon, with caps, powder flask and shot pouch. Uttering a few words of cheer, he reverently pressed his lips to her hand, said good-night, and withdrew from the house.

Homeward bound, he uttered a sound between a sigh and a chuckle.

"Drat et all! I hates ter do et, but I can't feel safe with her around when thet detective's nosin' about. He might diskiver too much. Pore little gal!"

Such were the low-spoken words that escaped his lips—words hinting vaguely at a crime in the past.

A half mile from town a man, darting out of a clump of bushes beside the road, uttered a terrible yell, and wildly brandished his arms, then darted away.

With a snort of terror, the mule reared upright between the shafts, then turning sharply, upset the vehicle.

The fall was a hard one, and when Peggs arose he was dazed and bleeding.

CHAPTER XII.

DR. ANTITOX.

In the roster of Tiptop's citizens the name of Obediah Antitox, M. D., occupied a high place.

The doctor himself was a short, stubby old man, with white "mutton-chop" whiskers and bristling mustache. He bore his age well, and his black eyes were as keen as those of the hawk.

A skilled practitioner, of careful and methodical habits and courteous manner, he had amassed considerable property, and lived in a handsome cottage a short distance from the centre of the town. His office was in a small building facing the street, removed only a few rods from his residence.

Dr. Antitox had just seated himself on his return from a visit to the polls, late in the afternoon, when he was brought to his feet by a lusty peal from his office bell.

The visitor was Goldspur, in the assumed character of Hercules Redneck. The doctor at once introduced himself,

The physician, visibly surprised, placed a chair for him, and asked:

"Well, Mr. Goldspur, how can I serve you?"

"I wish to engage you, sir, to make a post-mortem."

"A post-mortem examination?"

"Yes, sir. I have reason to believe that John Brown, who died suddenly at the camp-house last night, was a victim of some subtle poison."

"Murdered, you mean to say?"

"Precisely."

The doctor nodded sagely.

"Hem! It is a strange case—a very unfortunate affair. I have heard it spoken of frequently to-day, but neglected to view the remains. Dr. Fox was called in last evening, I understand, and diagnosed the case as heart disease—a rupture of the pericardium, in short—ha! ha!"

"Well, sir, I am always ready to promote justice. When and where do you desire the examination made?"

"To-night—here."

"Secretly?"

"Secretly. Whatever your finding may be, all knowledge of the matter must be withheld from the public for the present."

"The ethics of my profession forbid tattling, Mr. Goldspur. Bring the body here any time between 10 and 11 o'clock."

The detective nodded approval of the hour, and in a few minutes departed.

Shortly before 10 o'clock Goldspur and Pawnee Bill appeared at the camp-house. Burton King, restless and uneasy, was in waiting.

"Wal, gents, I did ther trick," he announced in a husky whisper. "I cut a log, an' packed et in sand ter keep et f'm rollin'. Everything went off all right."

"An' ther body?" Goldspur asked, resuming the Redrock vernacular.

"Wrapped in a wagon-sheet, all ready ter tote off. An' gents, ye cain't git et away too soon."

The pards smiled grimly at the fellow's earnestness, while giving ready assent to his proposition. In another minute the body, snugly enveloped in three or four folds of stout canvas, was swinging between them.

Passing through the barn, they emerged upon the open prairie, and laid their course by an unfrequented way to the rear door of Dr. Antitox's office.

True to his word, the physician was in waiting. A long deal table, covered with oilcloth, stood in the center of an apartment just back of the office, and in response to a sign from Antitox the pards placed their burden upon it.

The heavy cloth curtains at the windows had been snugly drawn. Antitox at once closed the doors and lighted a large lamp suspended above the table. He then brought out a case of surgical instruments and a number of utensils.

"Now, gentlemen, I am ready for business," he quietly announced. "You may remove the canvas, then remain or retire, at your pleasure."

"I'll go, for carving cadavers is not in my line," Pawnee decided, with a wry face.

The physician nodded. Then the wagon-sheet was removed from the body, and the quarter-blood at once departed.

When he had again closed the door, Dr. Antitox turned to the table, and critically examined the body. Goldspur watched him closely. Nothing was to be read from that grave, impassive face, however.

Presently the physician stopped at the head of the long table and fell into a profound reverie, which lasted some minutes.

"To whom shall you charge this crime?" he at length asked, turning abruptly to the detective.

"To the men known as Spanish John and Rupert Belmont."

Antitox nodded, and again reflected. After some minutes he seized a small glass and turned to the long rows of bottles covering the walls. Here he proceed-

ed with the utmost care, forming a compound drop by drop. That done, he put down the glass and took from the surgical case a small syringe, scalpel, and pincers.

Opening Brown's shirt at the throat, he pushed the garment down on the shoulders and turned the head to expose the side of the neck. Here he made an incision with the scalpel, then with the pincers carefully gripped and raised a vein. In another minute he injected into this vein one-fourth of the compound in the glass.

Stepping back, he opened his watch, laid it on his desk, and noted the time.

"Come, Mr. Goldspur—sit down and have a cigar," he exclaimed, cheerily. "I must wait fifteen minutes. In that interval I shall explain a theory I have formed."

The detective bowed, and complied with the request.

"In the early days of my professional career I was somewhat of a rover," Antitox proceeded. "In a word, I was the victim of a fever for adventure, and that fever led me into the central portion of Brazil, where I resided for upward of five years."

"Of my adventures there, or of the many curious things I learned, it is not necessary to speak—that is, beyond the one thing, the essential point involved in the theory I have just mentioned."

"This point has to do with a certain mysterious and deadly drug in use among the natives there. By them it is crystallized, by an unknown process, from the juices of two creeping vines. The crystals are small and of irregular form, and are readily soluble in water or saliva. Held in the palm, they have a dark amber hue; placed between you and the light they became a vivid, flashing green. Conveyed to the mouth or tongue, one of these crystals quickly dissolves, forming a tiny drop of almost tasteless liquid. Convulsions speedily ensue; then comes coma of from thirty-six to forty-eight hours' duration, and death, if the proper restorative measures are not taken. The administration of two crystals is succeeded by convulsions and death. There is no antidote known."

"During my residence in that part of Brazil a number of cases of such poisoning came under my observation, and I became well acquainted with the symptoms induced by the drug. In the case of coma, it is extremely difficult to distinguish it from actual death. There is but one resuscitant known, the one I have just applied, and it is fallible."

"Poisoning by means of this drug is extremely difficult of detection, and it is well-nigh impossible to establish lawful proof. So far as can be determined, the drop of liquid formed from the crystal undergoes, when taken into the body, a chemical change and becomes transformed into a subtle, non-odorous gas. It is this gas which holds the subject in coma; and when the nerves and vital organs have become thoroughly permeated death ensues."

"If Brown died from the administration of one of these crystals, a post-mortem will reveal nothing, Mr. Goldspur."

"But are you sure, doctor, that the Brazilian drug was the one given?"

Before replying, Dr. Antitox looked at his watch, started slightly, rose, and again injected a small quantity of the compound into the raised vein.

The detective watched him admiringly and with keenest interest.

In a moment Antitox returned to his seat. He nodded slightly, and said:

"I may safely say that I suspect as much, Mr. Goldspur. If I am correctly informed, Brown fell in convulsions, while smoking a cigar given him by John Barford. It is an easy matter to conceal such a crystal in a cigar butt, where the saliva of the smoker would readily dissolve it."

"It would seem so, sir."

"Then, too, there are certain external signs, slight, but morally sure to the

practiced eye, which follow the use of the drug. These signs are present."

"You believe that Barford found it necessary to do away with this man Brown. Now, Barford, I happen to know, was for some years a resident of that very portion of Brazil in which this poison is habitually used."

"Putting all these facts together and basing conclusions upon them, I may, I repeat, safely say I suspect the green crystal was used."

"Oh!" It was the only utterance Goldspur could make just then. Dr. Antitox, in his peculiar manner had rent the shroud of mystery enveloping the camp-house tragedy!

The subject soon changed. Then the third and fourth injections were given. Dr. Antitox looked at his watch and remarked:

"In twenty minutes I shall be satisfied that two crystals were given—that life is extinct. Then I shall proceed."

But at that moment the supposed corpse rose to a sitting posture. Startled, the doctor and the detective leaped to their feet.

Ere they could put forth a hand, however, John Brown uttered a terrible yell and sprang from the table to the floor. Violently wrenching open the locked door he howled frightfully and plunged out into the darkness.

Transfigured with amazement, Goldspur turned to the physician.

"The dead alive!" he ejaculated. "Dr. Antitox, you are a savant—a wizard!"

Shaking his grizzled head, the doctor sadly replied:

"Back to life—yes! But better far had we let him sleep, for he is now doomed to death in life! He is a raving maniac!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRAP.

Dr. Antitox's mien was at once sorrowful and impressive, and Goldspur was conscious of a profound shock when he heard that startling announcement.

"What mean you, doctor?" he quickly asked.

"Just what I said. The man is insane. It is a peculiarity of the accursed drug that frequently when the coma is broken the patient arises bereft of reason. It was this knowledge which caused me to hesitate."

"Good heavens! Is the mania incurable?"

"Alas, I fear so!"

"But, come, Mr. Goldspur. We must make pursuit and get the poor wretch under restraint, if possible."

"Yes, yes! We must catch him. The matter must be kept secret, or those scoundrels will become alarmed and elude the net."

Dr. Antitox hastily caught up and donned hat and coat, and, with the detective, quitted the office. A short distance from the building they halted and listened.

The crowd in town had diminished but slightly, and there was much confusion in the vicinity of the Silver Shades and along the single street.

"No sound short of an Indian war-whoop could be distinguished above that babel," Goldspur observed. "It is hardly probable that he went in that direction, doctor, yet it might be well for you to look through that part of the town. I'll beat up the brush."

Antitox bowed and briskly moved away. Left to himself, the detective pushed on toward the outskirts of the town, in the direction Brown had started.

The wisdom of this course was soon manifest, for scarcely had Goldspur cleared the bounds of Tiptop when a frantic yell rang out some distance ahead.

"Aha! There's the quarry, sure enough," the tracker muttered, and he quickened his pace.

About two hundred yards further on he met a man in a two-wheeled vehicle, drawn by a white mule.

This belated traveler was Zebulon

Peggs, returning from the old ranch house.

"Hallo!" the detective hailed. "Hold up a minute, can't you? Did you meet a man just now—the man who uttered that cry?"

"Did I? Bagonets! Consarn ther critter—"

"You did, then, Mr. Peggs?"

The veteran started, peered stupidly at his questioner, and demanded:

"Who're you?"

"Goldspur."

"Wal, I met ther critter. He skeered my mule an' upset ther cart—dang 'im!"

"And did you notice which way he went?"

"Int' ther big tim'er on ther west. Ye cain't ketch 'im. He runs like a deer. Vum!—yes."

Goldspur studied a moment, then stepped toward the cart to seat himself beside the veteran. But Peggs had been slyly preparing to terminate the interview. Under cover of the darkness, his whip descended viciously and the vehicle rolled rapidly away.

"Confound the fellow!" the detective muttered. "He acts queerly. Where's the rub? Fainted this morning—runs away now. Peggs, my lad, you're hiding a blemish. I'll find it!"

With that, Goldspur retraced his steps and sought Dr. Antitox.

"The man went south and entered the big timber," the detective explained when he had found the physician. "To look there to-night would be the old story of the needle and the haystack."

"Yes, such a search would be useless," the doctor agreed. "We will have to wait till morning."

The two men were standing in the shadow at the corner of a building. Directly behind them was the foot of a wooden stairway leading to the upper floor, which was a sort of public hall. Beneath this stairway a crouching, indistinct shape quickly appeared, and a blinking black eye, aglow with a sinister light, peered sharply at them through the space between two of the steps.

This spy was none other than Spanish John.

The detective, it will be remembered, was in the assumed character of Hercules Redrock. Surprise at seeing the pretended sport and Dr. Antitox together and apparently on confidential terms, quickly deepened into suspicion on the part of the gambler, and he had stealthily crept beneath the stairs, where nearly every word that passed between the two men, no matter how guarded the voice, could be distinctly heard.

At the moment Spanish John assumed this position he was wholly unsuspecting of the pretended Redrock's true identity; but he was not to remain long in ignorance.

A few unimportant remarks passed between the two men, and they seemed about to separate when the following occurred:

"Come—spend the night with me, Goldspur."

"Thank you, doctor; no. I shall remain at the camp-house. To go elsewhere might seriously disarrange my plans."

"But if you are homeward bound I'll accompany you a part of the distance, for I am going to turn in quickly."

That was all Spanish John heard, for the two men at once moved away. But it was enough. He had penetrated the detective's cunning disguise, and his eye snapped and sparkled as he crept from the covert.

Meanwhile, Goldspur and the doctor had proceeded but a few rods when they met Peggs, the cobbler.

The veteran was greatly perturbed, and the night dark, but he recognized Antitox and stopped him.

"Doc, my gal is missin'," he informed, nervously. "Hev ye seen her?"

"I have not, Peggs. But I daresay she'll turn up all right. At some of the neighbors, perhaps."

"No, I tell ye, she's missin'. Su'thin's happened her. She left home right after supper ter do an errand, an' she ain't come back."

"And it is now after midnight. It does look suspicious. Have you made any attempt to find her?"

"No. I've bin away all evenin', an' jest got home."

"An' Miss Ranger?" interjected the detective, keeping up his assumed character. "She with yer gal?"

"No, stranger, thet's ther queer part o' et. She started ter ther camp-house soon es supper was over ter see Brown's cawpse afore et was laid away, an' she ain't come back."

"How ye know they ain't tergether?" Peggs was silent.

"Vum! Et might be," he admitted, after a moment. "Anyway, both gals aire gone, an' Mommy's nigh crazy. I sw'ar I don't know what ter do."

"Go tell ther Marshal."

"Thar hain't no Marshal."

"Tiptoe is not incorporated," Antitox explained, then added:

"You'd better go home, Peggs, and let me attend to the matter."

"Ef I c'u'd see Lucky Luke—"

"I'll see him and explain. He can call at your house to get the facts."

"All right, doc, ef ye will. I'm too shaky ter be any good. Good-night."

"By ther way, Mr. Peggs, ye war away, ye say?" the detective asked, as the veteran turned to depart.

"Yas."

"C'u'd ye tell us jest whar ye was?"

"Bagonets! I c'u'd, but I won't. Whar I was cuts no figger."

"Perhaps not. Wal, good-night."

Peggs walked away. The doctor and Goldspur turned and retraced their steps a short distance, then paused.

"What's up?" Antitox asked. "I took the cue from your nudge, but I confess I'm in the dark."

"As am I. But I suspect Peggs is keeping something back. In a word, I believe he has spirited the girls away!"

"But his object, man—"

"Who can say? But let us drop this branch of the subject."

"Tell me, doctor, who is this Lucky Luke?"

"Luke Lightfoot."

"Sport?"

"Yes; and hunter. He is said to be the best trailer in the territory."

"And his character?"

"You can trust him. Indeed, if you need help, he's your man. I'll vouch for him."

"I do need just that. Pawnee has gone to the Cimarron, and there are two trails to look up at daylight."

"Very good. Luke is your man. If you'll come with me—"

"No, doctor; we must work secretly. No one must see me with the hunter. You find him, and bring or send him to the camphouse."

Antitox, whose interest was keenly aroused, readily agreed.

Soon thereafter, Goldspur entered the camphouse. The building was dark, silent, and deserted. Lighting a lamp, the detective drew down the curtains, pushed a chair to the table, and sat down.

A moment later he heard steps without. Then the door was thrust open, and two men stepped into the apartment. They were tall, sinewy fellows, bearded, and wore their hats slouched closely over their eyes.

"Evenin', pard," the foremost saluted.

"Gentlemen, good-evening."

"Lonesome?"

"Oh, no; not much."

The appearance of the men impressed Goldspur unfavorably. Moreover, their presence at that time would prevent his interview with Lightfoot, and he decided to withdraw and await the sport outside.

But at that juncture the door was again flung open, this time to admit three men. In appearance, these newcomers were

even more repulsive than their predecessors.

All eyed the disguised detective in a covert but critical and sinister manner, while they were moving about the room, and his doubts as to the character and purpose of the men quickly vanished.

They were outlaws, and their mission was to entrap him!

As that thought assailed him, Goldspur coolly arose and stepped from behind the table. At the same moment the two men seated beside the door sprang to their feet, and the taller one exclaimed:

"Hold on, pard! We wants ter do a leetle business with yer!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A GRIM DISCOVERY.

The voice of the outlaw was at once deep and significant, sinister and terrible. He had pushed his hat back, and a hideous smile distorted his face.

At the same time he brandished a long knife which he had drawn from a sheath in his belt—an example quickly followed by his comrades in crime.

Of the trio, two had assumed positions beside the windows. The third man remained standing near the centre of the room. Thus, every outlet was securely guarded, while the extra man was near enough to the detective to grapple him at the first sign of resistance.

The five outlaws felt that they had plotted most cunningly, and the glitter of the five blades flashing in the lamp-light was not a whit more cruel and menacing than the gleam in the half-score eyes watching the detective.

Goldspur stood cool and impassive. His Javert-like instinct had prepared him for the denouement, and he gave no evidence of surprise. His fearless blue eyes glanced at each of the miscreants in turn, then flashed back to the spokesman.

"Business, eh?" he returned.

"Hexactly!"

"State it."

"Yer bin stealin' hosses!"

"You're a liar!"

"No hard words, pard. We've got yer!"

"Poof! You are bungling rascals. Do you think that flimsy charge conceals your purpose?"

"It'll do!"

"Do for what?"

"Ter hide what we does!"

"Oh!"

"Yas. Yer see, when yer karkus is found ter-morrer with a hoss-thief kyard on et, everybody'll say, 'Sarved 'im right!' "

The detective laughed.

"Upon my word, you seem sure of the game," he remarked.

"We is, an' now calls on yer ter s'render."

"If I refuse?"

"Thar's five o' us."

"I see there are."

"Sport, no more foolishin' goes. Yer must come ter Limerick!"

"Oh! I thought there were five of you!"

The outlaw uttered a snarl of rage. It dawned upon him that Goldspur was merely parleying to gain time.

"Forward!—all!" he grated, brandishing his knife.

The four men promptly obeyed—the more readily, perhaps, because the detective had as yet refrained from drawing a weapon.

With a single backward step, Goldspur retreated behind the table, where he seized and extinguished the lamp, which he instantly hurled at the nearest of his foes. The next breath, the table followed the lamp, and then he caught up the heavy chair and swung it rapidly around his head.

Dire confusion followed. In the intense gloom, the outlaws were unable to dodge the missiles, both of which took effect. Then the chair struck another

one, knocking him down, and Goldspur found himself near the door.

"Look out!" warned the chief, divining the detective's purpose. "In another minute Goldspur will slip us!"

In the excitement of the moment the fellow had forgotten the double role he was playing, and the detective distinctly recognized the voice of Rupert Belmont!

Then, the ruffian's prediction was verified. The door opened, and closed with a bang. All realized that the quarry had escaped!

"Curses! After him, fellows, but don't scatter too much. Remember the other job."

Meanwhile, Goldspur was speeding swiftly and silently through the darkness. His sole aim, just then, was to intercept Dr. Antotix and Lucky Luke before they reached the vicinity of the camp-house.

In this he was successful.

Just before daybreak a man emerged from Tiptop's one hotel, and walked rapidly in the direction of Zebulon Peggs's domicile.

This man was Goldspur. The attack upon him the preceding night had warned him to lay aside the pseudonym and character of Hercules Redrock, and he now appeared in a fresh disguise.

His garb was that of a cowboy. Hands and face seemed deeply bronzed by exposure, and the tawny mustache and hair had become almost jet black under some skillfully applied dye.

Passing rapidly along the smooth, wide street, until he had gained the southern boundary of the little town, he entered a sort of narrow lane, and a few minutes later paused in the rear of Peggs's stable.

The two-wheeled vehicle stood just where the veteran had left it when he unhitched a few hours before, and Goldspur examined it carefully.

Then the detective sat down, and waited until the sky grew light in the east, when he arose and closely scanned the tracks left by the wheels in the soft, sandy roadway.

"It is as I thought," he mused. "An axle is bent, or the hub is too large for the axle, on the right side, and the wheel rocks, leaving a winding, serpentine trace. Well, if this is not a result of the accident last night, I'll soon know where Peggs went."

Without further delay Goldspur cut across lots to the livery barn, where he found Burton King astir. To keep up his assumed character, the detective was compelled to abandon his splendid roan for the present, so hired a horse, trappings, and a Winchester from King.

At the point where Brown's abrupt and startling appearance had caused the mule to upset the cobbler's cart, Goldspur found Lucky Luke in waiting, fully armed and standing beside a splendid black horse.

Lightfoot, as previously stated, was a trained athlete. He was a young man, not older than two-and-twenty, with a quiet, resolute air, and many graces of face and figure.

His mustache, hair, and eyes were black as night, and he looked a stranger to fear.

However, his face was white and drawn like the visage of one who has just spent a night of sleepless anxiety, and he hailed the detective's approach with a sharply drawn breath of relief.

"The trail is here, sir, quite plainly marked, leading straight into the timber," he announced, as Goldspur drew rein.

"You are prompt, Lightfoot," the detective returned, in a pleased tone.

"I am spurred by anxiety, sir, and the uncertainty surrounding those helpless girls urges me to haste."

"Well, Lightfoot, I predict that we shall soon know something of their whereabouts."

"Take up Brown's trail and follow it until you locate or capture him. If you

lose him or the trail, meet me at the point agreed upon."

"If I get in roping distance, I'll sure get him, for my nag and I have handled most everything, from a wild stallion to a grizzly bear, and we'll try not to let this madman break our record."

Then Lightfoot walked into the timber, leading his horse, and speedily passed from view.

Meanwhile, Goldspur's eyes had not been idle. A glance at the trail beyond the point where the card had upset showed the peculiar impress left by the defective wheel, and he at once understood that the injury to hub or axle had not been sustained in the accident.

Then a closer inspection revealed that the vehicle had made at least two trips each way on that little-traveled road, the preceding day, and the detective smiled grimly.

"Rather singular, yet perhaps wholly insignificant," he thought. "Anyway, we'll soon know."

Remounting, Goldspur rode onward. At times, the trace grew faint and indistinct, but in each instance reappeared in the next sand patch.

Several miles it ran thus, then disappeared in a long stretch of grassy road crossing a glade in the timber, and for some time the detective was at fault.

Certain it was that Peggs had quitted the trail somewhere in the glade, for the mark of the wheel was not to be found in the sandy soil where the trail re-entered the timber.

Under such circumstances, Goldspur could have but one recourse—the time-honored "circle." Riding back to the point at which the old trail entered the glade, he turned aside, plunged into the timber and slowly circled around until he had crossed the trail on the opposite side of the open.

Just beyond this point there were signs that a vehicle of some kind had crossed the short buffalo grass and entered the timber. The trace was very faint, but the detective deemed it sufficient.

A little distance back in the timber it became plain enough to be followed readily, and Goldspur pushed forward as rapidly as possible.

A half-hour later he discovered through the trees the old ranch house. Hitching his horse, he cautiously advanced to the edge of the timber.

A long and earnest survey of the gloomy pile convinced the detective that it was deserted, and he boldly entered the glade.

At the same moment a man emerged from a timber clump opposite the eastern end of the old house, and with a start of surprise Goldspur recognized in this personage his new ally, Lucky Luke.

Lightfoot just then looked up, saw and recognized the detective. Silently he pointed to the ground and then to the cabin.

"Both trails lead to the house," muttered Goldspur. Then another thought assailed him, and he exclaimed:

"Great heavens! If the girls are there, and the madman, we may well fear the worst!"

With a sign to Luke to quicken his steps, the detective ran forward, thrust open the door, and entered the house.

A search revealed nothing until the two men had ascended to the upper story. There clots of coagulated blood on the dusty floor gave evidence of a struggle, while at the foot of the ladder leading to the attic or garret lay the stock of a musket and a rusty bayonet.

"Good God! That was Peggs's weapon!" cried Luke, as he turned his agonized face to Goldspur. "Can it be that the girls were here?"

Mutely the detective thrust him aside and lightly ran up the ladder.

In a moment—a moment that seemed ages to Lightfoot, Goldspur's face appeared in the opening above.

"Come!" the detective exclaimed. "The girls were here—or one, at least. Come! There has been a tragedy. We must read the signs and get to work!"

CHAPTER XV.

RUBY RANGER'S RUSE.

Ruby Ranger was not, in the true sense of the word, a cowardly girl; yet she was conscious of an emotion closely allied to fear when she saw Peggs turn to depart.

To her young and fervid imagination there was something decidedly uncanny about the old ranch house, and she listened with bated breath to catch the footsteps of the retreating veteran.

Then, with a clang that rang dismally through the empty rooms below, the outer door shut, and the girl knew that she was alone.

That thought produced upon her over-taxed nerves the effect of a powerful tonic. It induced her to face the situation calmly, and invoked all the self-reliance of her naturally fearless nature.

Putting down the musket which Peggs had given her, she closed and fastened the trap-door, then opened one of the bundles and secured a blanket to hang over the window in the western end of the loft.

"After all, the situation is not so bad," she mused. "It is true that I am alone here, and far from any human habitation; but when that is said, the worst is said, for I have food, water, and means of defense, and shall be quite comfortable."

"To be sure, I am not to be envied just now; but this place is better than the settlement, where I should be constantly menaced by that odious gambler."

"Yes, yes! Poppy Peggs evidently knew what he was about, and I shall wait here patiently until he finds means to thwart Spanish John and take me away."

With these thoughts running in her head, Ruby prepared a couch of the blankets, blew out the candle, and lay down.

But she was not to sleep undisturbed.

Hardly, it seemed to her, had the pall of darkness settled over the old loft, when the door below stairs was violently flung open, and a heavy trampling sounded through the house.

Then came voices and steps, which gradually drew nearer, until they sounded in the room directly beneath the fair fugitive, who was now wide awake.

Pressing her ear to a crack in the floor, Ruby listened.

Two men were talking.

"Dandy, I tells yer some one hes bin in this ole cage," declared one. "Hold yer lantern hyar, tell I looks at these prents in ther dust."

"Nonsense, Noolan! Some hunter has stopped a moment, I suppose. Let's put this girl away."

"Whar'll yer putt'er?"

"In the end room. We can fasten the door. When she comes out of that faint, she'll simply mope and cry."

"Wall, she's comin' to, right now. Hold yer lantern hyar, pard, tell I sees ef she's r'ally awake."

A moment's silence followed. Then both men swore viciously.

"It's Polly Peggs!" Dandy ejaculated.

"Yas! A purty mess we've made of et!" growled Noolan. "Ther hat an' cloak fooled us all. I was sure 'twas ther Ranger gal. What'll we do?"

"Do? Why, we'll have to keep her here now, till we hear from the captain. 'Twill never do to carry her back to Tiptop. 'Twould spoil all!"

"So et w'u'd. But ther cap'n will rear."

"No. If he holds this girl, it will give him a grip on Peggs. Then he can compel the cobbler to give up the Ranger girl and keep his mouth shut."

Ruby heard the man called Noolan mutter an assent to this view of the case. Then there was a shuffle of feet, entering the east room, and the ruffian growled:

"More tracks! Dandy, some 'un's bin hyar, I tells yer. An' mebbe they'r hyar yet!"

"Where?"

"In ther loft."

"The trap is down. Steady, a minute and I'll see."

Crawling on all fours, Ruby had care

fully kept pace with the miscreants below. When she heard Dandy's feet strike the rungs of the ladder, her heart quivered with sudden terror. Then she resolutely quelled her fears, tightened her grip on the musket and crept close to the east wall, at one end of the trap door.

The next minute Dandy Dave hung his lantern on a nail and tried the trap.

It refused to give.

"It's stuck," the desperado grumbled. Then he braced his feet on the rungs of the ladder, bowed his head, and with his shoulders put forth a herculean effort.

The rotten wooden fastenings yielded. With one hand he pushed the door up and slightly past a perpendicular, when the upper edge rested against the roof.

Fortunately for Ruby, the raised door formed a screen, and she cowered closely in its shadow.

"Now we'll see," exclaimed Dandy, swinging himself into the garret, lantern in hand. "Hallo! there's been some one here lately, too. There's a blanket over the window, and a bunk on the floor. But the place is empty, now."

The desperado stood near the edge of the trap, turning the rays of the lantern here and there, to penetrate the gloomy corners of the loft.

"We can't do better than leave the girl right here," he continued. "There's a hook on the trap, and a staple below, so we can fasten her in. Just hand the jade up, will you, Noolan?"

Noolan slowly ascended the ladder, and swung the unconscious girl partially through the open trap-way.

Dandy seized the captive, and, despite his injured hand, carried her to the distant pile of blankets.

"I reckon she'll come to all right," he muttered. "Hang it all! a hold-up or a hoss raid is more in my line than kidnapping."

"Here, pard, take the lantern and get off the ladder. I'm coming down."

Ruby's heart beat high with hope. Could she avoid detection another minute, she would be safe!

Handing Noolan the lantern, Dandy waited until the ladder was clear, then seized the trap-door and prepared to descend. At that moment, a ray of light, shining through a crack in the floor, fell fairly upon the girl's face, causing the outlaw to utter a sharp cry of surprise.

Quick as a flash, Ruby sprang from her covert. The clubbed musket swept through the air. Dandy Dave threw up his hand to ward off the blow, but only partially averted it. Then he staggered and fell through the hatchway, dragging the weapon after him.

Nerved to desperation by her peril, Ruby hastily seized and closed the trap-door. The rotten wooden fastenings had been broken, and there was nothing to prevent its being raised, but she felt safer with it shut.

Then she knelt to learn, if possible, the plans of her enemies.

Although the force of the blow and the fall had partially stunned the desperado, he quickly recovered, and sat up.

Noolan regarded him with open-eyed astonishment.

"Faith! I t'ought yer was dead!" he announced. "What was et?"

"A girl."

"In ther loft?"

"Behind the trap-door, yes."

"Et was a man, mebber."

"No, 'twas a girl—curse her! My head will split!"

"What'll we do, now?"

"We must get up there. We must capture the she devil, and see who she is."

"I'll put a pistol ball through the first head that comes through the trap!" came in a deep and terrible voice from the loft.

"Fair warning, gentlemen!"

Both desperadoes started.

"Surely, that was the voice of a man!" Dandy exclaimed.

"Just thet, pard! I t'ought yer was off!"

"What'll we do?"

"Thet's what I axed you. Seems ter

me, tho', we'd better camp right hyar till ther cap'n an' some o' ther boys come. Ef we cain't git up thar, they sure can't git past us."

"That's true."

Satisfied that her ruse had produced the desired effect, Ruby at this juncture softly rose and stole toward the couch, where she could hear Polly Peggs quietly weeping.

"St! Polly!" she warned, just above a whisper.

The sobbing ceased. Then in a timid little voice came the question:

"Who is it?"

"Ruby!"

"No! It can't be!"

Unconsciously, grief and terror gave way to a feeling akin to delight, on the part of Polly Peggs. In another minute, the two girls were seated side by side, conversing in low tones.

But little time was consumed, just then, in explanations, for both maidens felt that there was not a breath to be lost, if they would escape. Accordingly, Ruby gave a few whispered directions, then stole away to the window.

Removing the blanket, she examined the sash. Much to her relief, it hung on hinges. Opening the window, the girl peered out.

Below, all was dark and silent. Thrusting out her hand, she grasped a branch of the friendly elm. A brief examination convinced her that the plan she had formed was feasible, and she returned to Polly.

Silently the two girls worked away in the darkness. At the end of a half-hour, all was in readiness for flight, and both stealthily approached the window.

Just as they reached it, a frightful yell rang through the house, and there floated up from below the sounds of a desperate combat!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MANIAC.

What had happened?

Assuredly, something out of the ordinary—something fearful and terror-inspiring.

While the two outlaws were seated near the door of the eastern room on the upper floor, conversing in low tones, a shadowy form had emerged from the timber surrounding the old ranch house, and crossed the glade with quick, restless strides. In the dense shadows at the end of the building, this shape had stopped and crouched in a shivering, shuddering, panting heap, like a hound completely blown by the chase.

For some minutes he remained thus, until the breathing had become less rapid, harsh and sibilant. Then the head lifted, and a pair of eyes appeared, glowing and gleaming in the darkness like those of a maddened animal. These eyes searched the vicinity slowly and carefully, then turned to the house.

A cunning, half-intelligible chuckle followed, and with a long-drawn breath the being sprang up, and darted rapidly, but with the noiseless footfalls of a panther, around the corner of the building. A moment later he appeared at the opposite corner, showing that he had completely encircled the house. Again he crouched, and with head clasped in hands remained in thought some little time.

Presently, he arose, stretched out his long and heavy arms, and uttered a peculiar cry. This cry, scarcely louder than the warm south wind sighing through the distant boughs, rang across the glade with a low and mournful cadence. But the eyes snapped with fury, and there was a grin of wolfish ferocity upon the thickly bearded lips.

Again slipping around the corner of the house, he stole along until he reached the door. Here, he listened a moment, then silently entered.

Meanwhile, Dandy Dave and Noolan had filled and lighted their pipes, and were impatiently awaiting the arrival of "the captain."

"I never see things take sech a contrary whirl all ter onc't," Noolan grumbled.

"Well, never mind. They'll be straightened out in jig time, presently. Then, too, we've got the soft end of duty to-night. Don't kick, for you're not hurt yet."

"Tain't thet. I'd ruther wrastle Old Scratch then ter mope hyar in onsartinty. Blamed—"

The ruffian stopped. His nether jaw dropped, and the pipe fell unheeded to the floor.

Dandy sprang to his feet, uttering a sharp oath of surprise.

Something very like an apparition confronted the two rascals, and it was with difficulty they kept from uttering shouts of alarm.

A tall, heavily-made man, hatless and with clothes hanging in almost countless shreds, had noiselessly appeared, and now stood a few paces distant, regarding them with a look of peculiar intensity.

His bristling hair and beard were slightly streaked with gray; his features wore a deathly pallor, and from the depths of his dark eyes shone a fitful glow, like that thrown out by a half-dead coal.

For fully a minute, this intruder remained silent and motionless. Then, just as Noolan hastily arose, a terrible cry pealed from his lips, and he bounded into the room.

The first thought of the two outlaws was to draw and use their revolvers; but, before they could pull the weapons from the holsters, the madman was upon them, clutching their throats with the relentless grip of a Nemesis.

The struggle that ensued was most desperate. The three men whirled here and there, the maniac with his powerful arms outstretched, each hand grasping a throat; the two victims, with empurpled faces and starting eyes, each writhing, twisting, and tearing frantically at the huge hands, seeking to break that frightful clutch.

Then, a hollow, mocking laugh rang through the old building, and with a quick gesture the maniac sent the two men reeling in opposite directions.

As luck would have it, Noolan fell against the old musket standing beside the wall. In an instant he was upon his feet, bleeding, choking, gasping and half dazed. Raising the ponderous weapon, he struck viciously at the madman; but the blow went wide of the mark, and the musket stock was shattered against the wall.

A frightful roar escaped the maddened intruder, and he leaped straight at the desperado; then, the butt of the musket barrel, describing a sharp curve, struck him in the chest and hurled him backward, while the rusty bayonet, dislodged by the force of the stroke, rattled noisily to the floor.

"Quick, thar!" hoarsely shouted Noolan, to Dandy. "Hustle, an' we'll drive off the crazy fool!"

The cry was enough. Gasping stertorously, and hardly conscious of what he was doing, Dandy Dave lunged forward and seized the bayonet. The next breath, both outlaws furiously assailed the intruder.

But the madman was endowed with superhuman strength and activity. Although bleeding from a dozen wounds, he lightly parried blows that would have felled an ox, and slowly crowded his assailants to the wall.

Suddenly wrenching away both gun barrel and bayonet, he flung them aside. Then, a sharp, fierce cry broke from his blood-flecked lips, and John Brown turned and fled!

Unnerved, and fairly quivering with terror, the two outlaws cowered weakly against the wall, unwilling to believe the evidence of their eyes. Noolan was the first to rally. Slowly, he crossed the room, closed and fastened the door.

"Et was a keen call," he remarked, with a slight return of his reckless spirit.

"Pity we didn't use our guns. Thet critter will shore kill somebody."

Dandy nodded, and uttered an oath.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

"Do? Wait till ther cap'n comes. Ef we stays hyar, we're safe; ef we ventures out, thar's a chaine fer another tussle with thet critter. I reckon he dens hyar, an' so won't go far."

Again Dandy nodded. Then he started and looked up.

"Noolan, you said something then," he asserted. "This madman is the chap who lives in the loft."

"P'raps."

"No, sure! Don't you see it all? He was coming home. We were in the way and he attacked us. 'Twas a girl I saw up there, after all!"

"But ther voice, pard? Et sounded like a goriller!"

"Assumed, doubtless, to hold us off till the old man came."

"Pard, yer argies like one o' these hyar perfessors!"

"We must look into the matter, at once, Noolan."

Noolan agreed. Seizing the gun barrel, Dandy thrust open the trap door. Then he placed his hat on the muzzle, and slowly raised it just above the level of the loft floor.

As anticipated, no shot answered the ruse. In another minute, the two outlaws had ascended the ladder and entered the attic.

"Empty!" grumbled Noolan, flashing the rays of the lantern from side to side. "Just look at ther windy, over yon!"

True enough! The window was open. The birds had flown!

With a muttered malediction, Dandy seized the lantern, approached the casement, and looked out.

A large branch of the elm grew against the house. The light disclosed numerous small twigs, bent or broken. "Out o' ther windy, an' down ther tree!" muttered Noolan.

Dandy Dave made no reply just then. Thrusting his ally back, he turned, quickly walked the length of the attic, and descended the ladder.

Noolan kept at his heels.

"Get your guns ready," Dandy advised, unfastening the door. "We must get out of this at once, and warn the captain."

"But thet he-old critter—"

"Shoot to clear the way, if you have to. Remember just this: if Polly Peggs reaches Tiptop, there'll be for us small choice between the Vigilante's rope and the captain's knife!"

Noolan merely nodded, like one who had heard a well-known truth. Then Dandy pushed open the door, and the two passed out of the east room, weapons in hand, and a moment later quitted the house.

The madman had disappeared.

With ejaculations of relief, the two outlaws hastily crossed the glade, and entered the timber, where they had left their horses.

There, a disagreeable surprise awaited them.

The animals were missing!

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE TRAIL.

To explain Luke Lightfoot's agitation when he saw all around him, in the eastern room on the second floor of the old ranch house, those evidences of a fearful struggle, it is only necessary to say that there existed, between himself and Ruby Peggs, a secret betrothal.

True, it was not yet established that Polly had been carried to the old house; but intuition often does much in such cases. Then, Luke had tracked the madman, John Brown, to the very threshold, and here were all the signs of a frightful struggle.

What did it mean?

Had poor Polly indeed fallen a victim to the dementia of the unfortunate traveler?

Long before the bewildered brain of the sport could work out a solution, the face of Goldspur appeared in the opening above, as has been narrated.

Like a dash of cold water to a fainting man came the detective's words, rallying Luke from his stupid inertia, and in another minute he had swung himself up the ladder, and placed himself, cool and resolute once more, at Goldspur's side.

"One of the girls has been here, perhaps both," the detective repeated, pointing to the distant bunk. "There are imprints of a small shoe in the dust. There has been red work, too, for there are traces of blood from the edges of this trap all the way to the window yonder, and the sill bears the same red stain. Some one escaped through the window, I think. You read the sign here, while I go below."

Luke simply nodded, and quickly bent to the task in hand, while Goldspur descended and passed out of the house.

At the foot of the elm the detective found a number of strips, torn from a blanket, securely knotted together. This improvised rope he carefully put aside, then stooped to examine the soft earth beneath the tree.

What he saw there was evidently highly pleasing, for he rose with a smile and slowly followed the faint trace across the glade and into the timber.

At a certain point, he stopped, turned and retraced his steps to the front door of the old house, where he again stooped and searched the earth, moving to and fro like a hound seeking the scent it has momentarily lost.

Some minutes passed thus. Then he straightened up, smiled, and walked back to the house, where he calmly sat down in the doorway.

Presently Luke appeared.

"Well?" asked the detective, looking up.

"Both girls were in the loft, sir, and both escaped through the window, creeping down a branch to the body of the elm, where they swung off and descended by means of a rope made from part of a blanket. I don't think either of them was wounded, for there are no traces of blood on the branch."

"No, neither of them was injured in the least," Goldspur assented. "Peggs brought Ruby Ranger here early in the night. Later, his daughter was captured and carried here by two men, who forced the trap-door and placed her in the loft. Some time after that, Brown appeared, and attacked the two men. He wounded both, and was himself injured and driven off. The girls escaped from the loft, doubtless while the struggle was in progress. They helped themselves to the outlaws' horses, and rode away. Brown and the outlaws departed afoot, the former going north, the latter northeast, in the direction of Tiptop."

"Such, at least, is my theory, and the various trails in and around this place go to sustain it."

Luke gazed at the detective in surprise. Before he could speak, however, Goldspur arose, saying:

"Get your horse, now, and join me yonder in the timber. We shall let Brown go for the present, and try to follow the girls."

"It is singular they went westward," Luke observed.

"It was very dark, you must remember, and they were doubtless greatly excited."

Securing his horse, Goldspur returned to the point where the fugitive girls had mounted the outlaws' animals. While awaiting Luke's approach, he again carefully scanned the ground.

Signs were there which he had not mentioned as yet—signs plainly proving that three horsemen were in pursuit of Ruby Ranger and Polly Peggs. It was this fact which had determined him to abandon the search for the madman for the present.

Lightfoot wasted little time in fetching up his horse. His face fell when the

detective pointed out the double trail, but he merely said:

"'Twill be the easier to follow!"

Then they mounted, and the pursuit began. Both understood that the outlaws had taken the trail since daybreak, and hoped to overtake them ere the latter should sight the girls.

For some miles the trail ran nearly due west, through timber comparatively free of undergrowth. Then it bore off to the northward, and finally entered a region badly cut up with dry canyons and overgrown with thickets of haw and wild plum.

The sky, beclouded from daybreak, had become further obscured by a sombre haze about sunrise. The warm south breeze had gradually died away, and as the forenoon advanced this haze shut down over all, like a dense fog.

It was late in the afternoon when Goldspur and his ally crossed the "bad lands" just mentioned, and they found it impossible to see objects distant a few paces distinctly, so dense had become that impalpable curtain, and they were compelled to proceed at a slower pace.

"There have been prairie fires off to the southward," Luke informed. "If a good breeze springs up, it will soon roll aside this curtain."

"It can't come too soon, then, for, under this haze we are in momentary danger of ambush."

Lightfoot's black eyes flashed, and his grip involuntarily tightened on the handsome repeating rifle he carried. He nodded quickly and drew rein.

"That is true. Let us proceed differently," he suggested.

"What do you propose?"

"That we leave the trail, and quarter off to the northeast, and thus get between the outlaws and the girls. The river is only three or four miles north of us. When the girls reached it, they had to turn either east or west. If they left it to the horses, they went east."

"On the other hand, they may have turned to the west, and ridden up stream."

"Not if they left it to the horses, sir, for the animals belong in or near Tiptop, I suspect. It is evident the girls are lost, and are riding at random."

"We have passed a number of houses where they could have inquired the way. Lightfoot."

"They could have done so, yes, sir. But let me explain. This tract through which we are passing is known as the Big Timber, and is very thinly settled. For months past, there has been much talk of an organized band of brand-burners and horse thieves, and it is generally believed that at least a number of the settlers through here are members or allies of the band. Polly Peggs is familiar with these reports. Doubtless, she attributes her abduction to some of these very marauders, so would hesitate to stop at any of the cabins."

The two trailers parleyed some little time, and decided to separate. A simple code of signals was arranged, then Luke rode off to the northwest, while Goldspur changed his course to the northeast.

An hour's ride carried the detective to the river, where he dismounted and carefully examined the only passable route—an old Indian trail running along the low bank. No trace of fugitives or pursuers was to be discovered.

"Lightfoot was wrong," he muttered. "If not recaptured, or driven across the river, the girls have gone up-stream."

There was but one course to pursue. Remounting, Goldspur rapidly rode westward, keeping in the old trail. The deepening shadows warned him that night was near at hand, and there was not a moment to lose.

Presently, a breath of cool air from the north stirred the treacherous haze. It was followed by similar puffs at short intervals; then came a stiff, cold breeze chilling alike to horse and rider.

The gloom deepened rapidly. The smoky haze, driven back by the wind

thickened in the woodland along the river, and the pungent odor of burning grass and wood, crossing the rippling waters, suddenly assailed the nostrils of man and beast.

Then, a murky, yellow glow appeared all along the north, and out of this glow descended a myriad of dull, red sparks. The wind, hot now as the breath of a furnace, arose with a sullen roar, and a shower of smoking cinders fell around the detective. In a twinkling, a thousand tiny tongues of flame sprang up along the southern shore.

Uttering a wild snort of alarm, the horse stopped, and shivered violently. Springing out of the saddle, Goldspur urged the animal down the bank, across the moist sands, and into the gradually deepening waters of the river.

Twenty paces from the shore, he stopped, just as a number of piercing shrieks jarred through the heated air. They were answered by an encouraging shout, a short distance up the river. Then came a burst of rifle shots, followed by a sharp cry of agony.

Startled, the detective turned his head, and peered sharply up-stream. At that moment, the wind veered capriciously, rending the dense cloud of smoke. Through the rift thus formed, Goldspur beheld a thrilling scene.

Riding madly across a timbered bluff on the northern shore, were Ruby Ranger and Polly Peggs, sharply outlined against a wall of flame!

A second thus, then an eddying burst of fire shut both girls from view.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON THE RIVER.

Goldspur shuddered. His face paled beneath that cunningly applied stain, while from his parched throat came the cry:

"Good God! Can nothing save them? Are they doomed?"

"No! no! They must escape! Forward, good horse—we must save them!" Fairly quivering with anxiety and dread, the detective laid hands upon pomel and croup, and attempted to spring into the saddle.

But the effort went for naught!

His feet were in the clutch of an invisible vise!

In bewilderment he glanced down, and a peculiar tremor assailed his stout heart.

The water, black with cinders and ashes, had crept unnoticed from his thighs to his elbows!

Even then the detective felt himself slowly sinking!

"It is the quicksands!" he muttered, with forced calmness. Then, he looked quickly at the horse, and added:

"Poor fellow! you are doomed! But you may save me."

Hastily swinging his rifle across his shoulders, Goldspur again grasped the saddle.

Then began a desperate struggle, under which the terrified and helpless horse sank deeper and deeper into the treacherous sand, while the detective slowly rose from its frightful grasp.

Every thought, every energy was bent upon escape. The minutes wore away, until perspiration stood in great beads upon the forehead of the struggling man. With a last powerful wrench, he drew his feet from the clinging sand, and fell inertly across the saddle.

A moment he rested thus, slowly churning the water with his feet, until his strength had, in a measure, returned; then he unslung the rifle, raised it above his head and slipped out into the sluggish current.

Guided by intuition, straight toward that bluff on the northern shore Goldspur laid his course, swimming silently, with only his head and one hand above the surface.

The smoke, lurid with the glow of the distant flames, hung in a steaming cloud over the face of the treacherous river,

shutting both banks from view. Midway of the stream, a slowly-moving object floated against him—an object which a second glance identified as an empty Indian canoe, drifting with the current.

Goldspur uttered an ejaculation of pleased surprise, and seized the vessel. Laying his rifle in the bottom, he deftly climbed aboard.

Thereupon, he found that the canoe contained an occupant, for in the forward end of the light craft lay a man, bound hand and foot!

The fellow was conscious, and his keen black eyes peered sharply at the face of the dripping detective. Then:

"Hallo! It is you—"

"Lightfoot—by heavens!"

"Exactly, pard! Cut me loose, will you?"

"Assuredly. But what is the meaning of this, Lightfoot?"

"It means that I found the girls, sent them across the river at an old ford, just above here, and was captured. While this was going on, a second gang of the rascals came up in the canoe. At their suggestion, I was tied up and placed in the boat.

"By rocking and rolling, I finally worked the canoe off its mooring in the sand, and started adrift. Just then, I saw the girls hesitate on the bluff, and yelled to encourage them. This drew the attention of the outlaws; they saw what I had done, and gave me a volley. Their aim was poor, but as the easiest way out of it I let out a yelp, and tumbled over.

"There—that's better. Those scoundrels know how to tie knots, I assure you. My hands are numb, and—"

"Hark!"

Both men bent low and listened anxiously. The wind had fallen for the moment, but an incessant popping and crackling came from the burning timber. Added to this was the sullen murmur of the river.

"I heard the dip of a paddle," Goldspur declared.

"Quite likely. There is an Indian village a short distance down the river. This canoe came from there, and it is probable the outlaws stole two while they were about it.

"Grip the paddle, there, and push over under the bluff."

The detective and Luke had addressed each other in guarded tones. Both knew that enemies were near, and neither desired an encounter just then.

Goldspur seized the paddle, as requested. Before he could thrust it into the water, however, the sounds which had called forth his exclamation were repeated.

"It is a canoe," Lightfoot declared, in a whisper. "It is dropping down stream, too—probably in search of this craft. It's time to puckachee."

Fortunately, the detective was a skilled canoeman. In another minute the boat was gliding noiselessly toward the northern shore, and a moment later the searching bark swept by under cover of the dense smoke. The dip of the paddles grew faint in the distance, and finally ceased.

"Now, for the girls," exclaimed Luke, with an anxious inflection. "Hold the boat close to the bluff, pard, and push straight up stream."

"You think they escaped?"

"If they followed my instructions—yes."

"They seemed cut off by the fire."

"On three sides, yes. On the fourth is a narrow ravine cutting through the western slope of the bluff and leading to a sheltered terrace overlooking the water. If they succeeded in reaching the terrace, they are safe."

"They knew of it, then, and the route?"

"I explained it all, and sent them there, intending to follow when you came up."

Goldspur was greatly relieved by this explanation, and bent to his task with renewed vigor. Soon thereafter Lightfoot gave the order to lay to against the base

of the bluff, then rose to his feet and uttered a peculiar chirrup.

Instantly the expected response came from above. A short parley followed, and the two girls descended a zigzag path to the boat.

Both were greatly excited, and it was some little time before they regained their composure. Then it was learned that they had been compelled to abandon their horses.

"They became frightened at the flames, and were utterly unmanageable," Polly explained. "We were obliged to dismount, leave them, and run afoot to the terrace."

"My horse, too, is gone," asserted Luke, ruefully.

"As is mine," Goldspur added, with a shudder as he recalled the quicksand. "Come, get into the boat, and we'll drop down the river. P— is not many miles distant, I judge, and we can secure fresh animals there."

Luke agreed to this, and at once embarked, with the girls. A few strokes of the paddle sent the canoe into the current, whence it floated slowly and silently down the stream.

The flames on either bank were dying away; the north wind, yet warm with the breath of the embers over which it had swept, was lifting and dispelling the cloud of smoke; the stars were beginning to appear, though blotted from view, anon, by the shifting haze. Against the southern sky was reflected a dull, red glow, marking the sweeping flight of the fire.

The occupants of the canoe drifted onward in silence. A signal call, ringing out from the top of the bluff, had been answered some distance down the river, and all realized that the outlaws were alert and watchful.

Presently a new sound broke the grim quiet—the splashing of numerous paddles. Then the rays of a lantern flashed across the dark waters, and three canoes swept around a bend in the river a short distance below the fugitives.

Luke glanced at Goldspur in dismay.

"We're cut off," the detective averred. "Those fellows are out in force. We must be near their rendezvous."

"'Tis near," Luke assented. "But what are we to do?"

"We must land, and take to the woods."

"That is it! Pull under the willows on the south shore, yonder."

Turning the prow of the canoe shoreward, Goldspur noiselessly forced the light bark through the water, and a moment later ran into the shadows of a clump of willows.

Luke sprang out, and helped the girls ashore. Then the canoe was lifted from the water, and carried some distance into the burned forest.

"I think that will puzzle them," Goldspur remarked. "They won't be able to determine just where we left the river without a long and patient search."

"And in the meantime, we can secure horses, and be on our way to Tiptop."

"Horses?"

"Yes. Old Abe, an Indian, lives a short distance up the river, and I think I can get ponies of him, if his place escaped the fire. Remain with the girls, and I'll be back shortly."

The detective assented to this proposition, and Lightfoot hurried away.

The trailer was not long absent. He returned leading four ponies. Halting beside the canoe, he looked around with an air of bewilderment.

Goldspur and the maidens had vanished!

CHAPTER XIX.

AGAINST ODDS.

The detective and his charges had watched Luke Lightfoot glide away into the shadows with feelings in which hope and uncertainty were strongly blended. All could hear the outlaws signaling each other along the river, and, while he had,

no fear for himself, Goldspur became anxious for the continued safety of the girls.

Nothing could be done, the detective knew, until Luke returned, or danger threatened. Bidding the girls seat themselves in the canoe and remain quiet, he silently retraced his steps a few rods and crouched behind a bowlder, to watch the movements of the boats on the river.

The outlaws were paddling aimlessly about, flashing the rays of the lantern here and there, in search of the missing canoe.

"The more of that, the better," Goldspur muttered. "Aha! that is a new move!"

In response to a signal from some one concealed along the shore, two of the boats had suddenly ceased their aimless movements, and were now headed straight for the southern bank.

A glance told the detective they would touch the shore some distance above the clump of willows opposite to him, and he again turned his attention to the boat with the lantern.

For some minutes, it continued its erratic movements. Then, a loud splashing, followed by the bellowing of steers, came from down the river, and the canoe steadied its course and pulled rapidly up the stream.

Like a flash, the truth came to Goldspur.

The brand-burners, mentioned by Luke earlier in the day, were at work!

The canoe with a lantern was a pilot boat in waiting to mark out the course to be followed by the men in charge of the stolen cattle!

The detective gazed at the scene with the keenest interest. Presently, a faint crackling of the charred twigs strewn the ground warned him of the approach of some one, and he crouched lower behind the bowlder.

Then, two men suddenly appeared between him and the river, and stopped within reach of his rifle barrel.

"The boys have made a good haul this time, Noolan," the smaller one remarked.

"Faith, yas! Ther Creeks must be sev'ral thousand dollars poorer, Dandy. 'Twill be a hard day's rustle ter burn, brand an' scatter thet herd."

"Well, you're the man to handle it."

"Hah! Ye're right. But better thet job than yours!"

"Yes. Curse the girls! I don't understand how they disappeared so complete—"

"Nor I, unless they war caught in ther fire."

"No, they escaped, and are in hiding somewhere along the river."

"Yer shore?"

"Positive."

Noolan shook his head, muttered a few words, and moved away, going up the river. After a moment's thought, Dandy turned and disappeared in the opposite direction.

Satisfied, now, that it would require the greatest care to avoid detection and a bitter struggle, if not capture, Goldspur rose and silently made his way toward the point where he had left the girls.

Meanwhile, Ruby Ranger and Polly Peggs, fully alive to the danger of the situation, had faithfully obeyed the detective's injunction, and crouched silently in the canoe, side by side.

The girls were worn with hunger and fatigue, yet neither was inclined to close an eye. Both were alert and watchful, and nervously started at every sound.

A moment after Goldspur walked away toward the river, a brace of dark and ghoulish forms crept from beneath a stony ledge near by, and stealthily approached the canoe.

Not a twig snapped, not a step sounded, to warn the unsuspecting girls of the foes encroaching upon them. Nearer they drew; then each suddenly flung himself forward, with a noiseless, panther-like bound, and, before either could resist or cry out, both maidens were captives.

Hardly a sound rose from that brief struggle to warn the detective, a few

paces distant. And when he returned to the canoe, following the departure of Noolan and Dandy Dave, it was only to find that the maidens had disappeared!

Nonplused at this mysterious vanishment, Goldspur peered keenly into the surrounding darkness. He could not, for the moment, believe that aught had befallen the girls, nor was he willing to believe they had quitted the canoe of their own free will.

Naught but the blackened trees and bowlders rose out of the dense gloom to confront him, and with an exclamation of chagrin and alarm, he knelt and placed his ear to the earth.

Here, he was more successful.

The faint sounds of running feet could be distinguished, somewhere in the distance; but before the detective could determine their location, the sounds ceased, and he was again at fault.

Angry with himself for having abandoned the girls, even for a moment, Goldspur rose to his feet, and plunged into the woods at random.

Ere he had taken a dozen steps, however, he was startled by a faint scream, straight ahead.

"Help! hel—"

That second cry was stifled and indistinct, as if checked by a firm hand pressed to appealing lips, and the detective bounded forward—swiftly, silently.

Some little distance thus, over logs and bowlders, up hill and down, and then Goldspur stumbled blindly into a well-worn path, and the next minute sighted his quarry against the sky as they crossed the crest of an open knoll two hundred yards ahead.

Anxious to close that dangerous gap, the detective again quickened his pace. When he neared the top of the knoll, he dropped upon all fours, and crossed thus, to lessen the chance of discovery.

At a safe distance below the summit, he arose, and hastened onward. The precaution had delayed him, while the abductors had evidently quickened their pace, and were now beyond hearing.

At the foot of the hill, the path, entering a narrow valley, turned almost due east, following the course of a small creek tributary to the Cimarron.

Just as Goldspur reached the angle thus formed, a man suddenly leaped out of a clump of charred and blackened undergrowth and confronted him, while over a pistol-armed hand came the challenge:

"Halt, an' han's up, pilgrim!"

Taken by surprise, the detective complied with the demand, saying:

"Flip they goes, pard, gun an' all!"

"But what-fer game is this? Rope me fer a maverick, ef I ketches yer lay!"

"Still an' stiddy, critter!" ignoring the questions. "'Count fer yerself, will yer?"

"A stray, jes' now, humpin' fer quarters. Fire run me t' ther drink, an' I dropped my hoss in the quicksand. Plum straight an' shore, now! Ef et's toll ye want—"

"Jest thet—fer one!" quickly. "Ther cap'n will collect et, tho'. For'ard, now, an' stiddy, straight down ther walley. Keep an eye on the leetle light over yon, an' ef yer swings a ha'r's bridth out o' line, w'y, over comes yer karkus!"

The outlaw cautiously stepped backward, to permit the detective to pass. Goldspur moved forward. At the same instant, the rifle in his hands descended with crushing force, hurling his captor to the ground.

Then, with the agility of a cat, the detective sprang upon and disarmed his prostrate foe. The rifle butt had struck the fellow fairly in the face, and he was badly dazed. Long before he recovered consciousness, his belt, quickly denuded of weapons and cartridges, had been cut into strips and fashioned into a gag, and bonds for wrists and ankles.

Assured, at last, that the captive would be unable to escape or give the alarm, Goldspur bore him a short distance into the blackened forest, where he concealed him behind a bowlder. That done, the detective returned to the path, carefully

examined the captured weapons, and started toward the distant light, which he now believed marked the location of the outlaws' rendezvous.

It shone through the doorway of a cabin or a dugout, he knew, and here the girls had probably been carried.

A near approach proved the habitation to be a stout log house. It stood in the centre of several acres of broken land, on the north side of the little creek.

Then, a glance through a window disclosed the objects of his search, the captive maidens, seated side by side on a rude bench, while opposite to them, talking in subdued voices, were grouped three men, rough, desperate-looking characters, and all armed to the teeth.

Goldspur listened a moment; but, beyond the fact that the trio were awaiting the arrival of the chief and others of the crew, nothing was to be learned from the rambling, disjointed utterances of the ruffians, and he determined to act.

Revolvers in hand, he sprang into the room, and sternly confronted the group. "I hold the drop, gentlemen, so—steady, all!"

"Hands up, now, or the shooting begins!"

Stupefied by that abrupt appearance and bold command, the three roughs mutely obeyed.

Then, the rear door was suddenly flung open, giving entrance to a number of armed and masked men, and in another minute Goldspur found himself completely hemmed in!

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN BRAND'S MESSAGE.

Mommy Pegg's eyes were red with weeping when the cobbler re-entered his domicile, following that brief interview with Dr. Antitox and the disguised detective, and she obstinately kept her face averted.

"I've sent fer Luke," Peggs tersely announced. "You dry up, Mommy, an' quit yer sniffin'. Don't 'pear ter do no manner o' good, an' I reckon ther gals hain't hurt. Vum!—no! Then—"

"Sniffin', hindeed! Hoh, my 'art!"

"Yas, Missus Peggs—sniffin'! which same is a mis'abul habit, an' leads ter wuss. Et's a bad p'int in a woman—a bad p'int! Yer predwecissors, Missus Peggs No. One an' Missus Peggs No. Two, hed no sech weaknusses. Reckomemberin' et, I regard 'em with rapter. Yas, Missus Peggs, with rapter! 'Specially, in sech moments es this."

The cobbler had turned, and was stolidly staring at two faded likenesses hanging on the wall. Unseen by him, Mommy lifted her head, with a wrathful flash in her eyes.

"Now, thar was Melindy," pursued Peggs. "Howbelt, her eyes was middlin' weak an' a bit crossed, she never sniffled! She was above et. Thet woman was a jewel! She—"

The veteran turned quickly. Mommy had risen, and her glance made him quail.

"Willain!"

"Hah!"

"Hoh! detistable wretch!"

"Hah! ole woman, go slow!"

"'Hold woman'—'hold woman'! Hoh, 'eavens! 'ear 'im! Willain, Hi defy you!"

"Defy me?"

"Defy you! Hi'm harmed! Hi will protect my life!"

Mommy drew a rusty pistol from her bosom. The weapon was already cocked, and she turned the muzzle toward Peggs.

A gleam of genuine terror appeared in the cobbler's single eye, and he precipitately retreated backward. His foot struck an obstacle, and down he went, flat on his back.

Mommy quickly followed up her advantage.

"Help!" groaned Peggs.

"Hi'll 'elp ye, ye bloody scoundrel!"

"Confess!"

"Cornfess?"

"So Hi said, Zebulon Peggs. Hi'm honto yer scheme!"

"W'at scheme, dear Mommy?"

"Don't 'dear Mommy' me! Keep yer 'dear' fer them as 'as bin—Melindy han' Georg'ana. Yes, han', fer Ruby!"

"Ha!"

"Hoh, ye willain! Ye thought Hi was ha blind worm. So Hi was—so Hi was! But the worm 'as flopped. Hi know hall!"

"Hah!"

"Hall, Hi repeat, Zebulon Peggs! Yer willainy 'as found yer hout. Hi'll de-nounce you!"

"Good heavens, Mommy—"

"Don't 'Mommy' me, ye snoop! Yer 'art his bad, Peggs. Hi've found yer p'ison, han' Hi knows yer scheme."

"Bagonets an' bullets!" roared the veteran, suddenly struggling to a sitting posture, despite the threatening pistol. "Be ye crazy, woman?"

"Hi ben't—no thanks ter you, ye willain!"

"W'at ye mean, woman?"

"Ye meant ter p'ison me, ye did!"

"Dang—Vum! I didn't!"

"Ye did!"

"Fer what? Explain, will ye?"

Mommy flourished a small vial filled with white crystals.

"P'ison!" she informed, bitterly.

"Fer rats!"

"Fer Mommy Peggs, the lawful wife hof yer bosom, she whom ye meant ter destroy, monster!" wildly. "Hi know hall! Hoh, ye hold Blue Beard—ye bloody pirit!"

"But why, Mommy? I don't understand."

"Ter be free. Ter marry fer money, ye willain!"

"Soho! Thet's yer idear, is et? Wal, wal! An' who'd I marry, Mommy?"

"Ruby!"

"Ruby?"

"Yes. Hoh, Peggs, Hi'm no hidiot, Hi warn you! You've habducted the pore critter, ter 'old till Hi'm dead. You've heven 'id haway yer hown flesh han' blood—"

A tremendous roar from the veteran checked the irate woman. Sinking back on the floor, Peggs forgot his troubles in a paroxysm of laughter.

Mommy regarded him wrathfully.

"Han 'ardened 'art!" she muttered.

A moment later, Peggs again sat up. He rubbed his eye vigorously, and looked at his wife.

"Mommy, ye bin makin' a fool o' yer-self," he informed.

"Zebulon Peggs!"

"Thet's my name—yas! Now, you keep still! Ye've bin makin' mistakes. Vum!—yes. Thet rat poison's bin in ther house 'most a year, an' ye bought et yerself."

Mommy Peggs's round face suddenly reddened, and she hung her head.

"As fer the gals," pursued the veteran, his voice growing dogged, "I shorely took Ruby away, an' she's not comin' back."

"Not comin' back?"

"No. I'm goin' ter trust ye with a secret, Mommy, jest ter prove yer s'picious aire all wrong. Ef Major Duncan sh'ud find Ruby hyar, I'd shore go ter ther pen!"

Mrs. Peggs looked at her husband in open-mouthed astonishment.

"I mean jest thet," he continued. "Re-volve thet fact in yer mind, madam—'ther pen'—'Pegs in ther pen!' An' thet's whar I'll go, ef ye open lip!"

"Hoh, 'eavens!"

"Come, now! None o' thet, but listen ter me. I'm a convict as was never convicted, ye understand. I did ther thing, an' was never diskivered. But when Major Duncan gits Ruby, ther jig's up!"

"W'ot thing, Poppy?"

The veteran leered cunningly.

"W'at, I don't say. On'y this: Ef 'twas ter be done ag'in, jest es 'twas, I'd do et ag'in. These I tells ye, an' I tells ye those. Bagonets an' bullets!—yas."

Mommy moaned, put down the pistol,

and wrung her hands. Her face was white again, and her pale blue eyes held a terrified light.

"Peggs! Peggs! Ye didn't—kill 'er?" she gasped.

"Naw!" indignantly. "She's safe an' sound."

"Thank 'eavens! Han' Polly?"

The veteran's face clouded.

"I don't know," he averred, gloomily.

"I wish Luke would come."

Then silence fell between the two. Peggs scrambled up, and began pacing restlessly to and fro, while Mommy watched him distrustfully.

Presently, hasty steps sounded without, followed by a knock at the door. Peggs caught up the pistol and thrust it into his pocket, then admitted Light-foot.

An explanation of Polly's errand was quickly made, Mommy Peggs dwelling only upon the fact that the girl had worn Ruby's hat and wraps.

"She is in the hands of Belmont and the gambler," Luke decided. "They have mistaken her for Ruby Ranger. Patience—I'll find her."

Soon, he departed.

Peggs and his wife exchanged a few words, then again lapsed into moody silence. Neither felt inclined to sleep, and both remained alert and watchful.

Just before dawn, stealthy steps approached the house. Then the door was struck a violent blow; steps were heard again, this time retreating, and all became quiet.

"W'ot was hit?" gasped Mommy.

Peggs shook his head, laid a finger across his lips, and quickly extinguished the light. The next hour passed in utter silence. Then day came, and the veteran opened the door and looked out.

A knife, transfixing a sheet of paper, had been thrust deep into the soft wood. Pulling out the blade, the cobbler seized the paper, and read:

"Zebulon Peggs:—You are warned to leave Tiptop at once. If you fail to go, or if you make known this message, you will forfeit your life. Fair warning!"

"CAPTAIN BRAND."

The veteran's face paled, but his eye glittered wickedly. Locking the door, he drew the curtains over the windows. Throughout the day no sign of life was visible about the house.

Directly after nightfall, Peggs slipped out and hurried stealthily to the office of Dr. Antitox, where he remained a few minutes. On his return, he and Mommy quitted the house by a rear door, and a moment later a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by a white mule might have been seen hurrying out of town.

The cart contained Peggs and his wife.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MAJOR ENMESHED.

Toward the close of a certain bright November day, a horseman, coming from the north, entered the little town of P—on the banks of the Cimarron.

He was an elderly man, erect and commanding mien. Hair and mustache, both cropped close, and of silvery whiteness, were in marked contrast to his swarthy, determined face and flashing black eyes. His garb was black, with slouched hat and cavalry boots. A repeating rifle hung at his back, and the gold-mounted butts of a brace of heavy revolvers peeped from the holsters attached to his belt.

In front of a hotel, he drew rein, dismounted, and tethered his horse. The men idly lounging along the corduroy sidewalk watched him with curious eyes, and quickly grouped at the hotel entrance.

"A marshal," whispered one.

"No. A deputy, mebbe."

"We'll soon know fer shore, fer thar comes Marshal Talbott."

At that moment the unknown entered the hotel office, closely followed by the

local officer, who quietly touched him on the shoulder, saying:

"Pardon, stranger. I am Marshal Talbott. Your name, please?"

"Major Duncan, sir."

"In the service?"

"No. Long retired."

"You are armed, I see."

"But within the law, Marshal Talbott. My journey is upward of sixty miles."

"You came from—"

"Arkansas City."

"That is sufficient, Major. I wish you luck," and the officer turned to depart.

"Hold, Marshal Talbott—a moment, please," called Major Duncan, and he beckoned the officer aside.

Curious eyes watched the two men, and curious ears vainly strove to hear their low-spoken words. When the interview ended Talbott withdrew, leading away the major's splendid black horse, while Duncan turned to the landlord and ordered supper.

Then the group hanging around the doorway slowly fell away, and the little ripple of excitement died out.

Among the gaping spectators, the ruffian we have known as Noolan had been a prominent figure, and he was the last to retire. Crossing the street, he approached two men lounging in front of a saloon, nodded, and curtly announced:

"Pards, ther old 'un's our game!"

Both roughs started, and stared hard at their leader.

"Not ther detective?"

"Not Goldspur?"

"Naw! Bechixt us, he's slipped t'rough, long ago. But we must nail ther old 'un. Come inside, an' we'll talk et over."

Meanwhile, in the hotel across the way, Major Duncan sat at supper. Just as the meal was ended, Marshal Talbott reappeared, and handed him a letter.

Nodding his thanks, the traveler opened, read and re-read the missive, then struck a match and carefully burned it.

For some minutes, the two men sat in silence. Then, the officer stirred uneasily, and asked:

"Do you proceed to Tiptop to-night, sir?"

"That is my intention, Mr. Talbott."

"The trail is very rough, and I would advise that you take an escort, or defer the trip till morning. The country south of the river is new, and there are many outlaws abroad, these times."

Major Duncan pondered a moment, then shook his head in a decided manner.

"No. I must go on, Marshal," he declared. "My errand is such that I cannot think of delay. With your directions as to the road, I shall pull through all right, alone. Nevertheless, I thank you for your kindly suggestions."

The men chatted briefly and quitted the room together. Then Major Duncan ordered his horse, mounted, and rode onward.

Marshal Talbott gazed after him uneasily.

"I don't like it!" he muttered. "That's a nasty bit of road, and there are nasty characters about. But he may pull through safely. I hope so."

The sun had set when Major Duncan cleared the confines of the little town. Drawing rein on the brow of a low hill, he anxiously scanned the trail winding across the sandy valley below him. A mile away lay the ford, plainly marked, while east and west wound the river, like a broad band of steel-gray ribbon.

Beyond the river was a horseman, slowly ascending a long, sandy slope. While the major watched, he gained the crest, and passed from view in a strip of woodland.

Striking spurs to his horse, Duncan descended the hill, and crossed the sandy waste. Just as he reached the ford, the pounding of hoofs on the trail behind him caused him to turn in his saddle.

Two horsemen were rapidly approaching. Both were garbed and equipped as cowboys.

"Hollo, stranger!" saluted the foremost, reining his steed to a walk. "Don't check yer hoss on this ford, fer thar's quicksand thar, an' et hes a mighty grip."

"Goin' south?"

"Some little distance, yes."

"So're we; eh, Pete?"

"Ter Tiptop—ye bet!"

Then the two cowboys urged their horses into the water, and in another minute the three were riding abreast.

A second glance at the fellows warned Major Duncan to be on his guard. His lips curled grimly, and his dark brow gathered in a slight frown. Beyond that, he gave no sign of alarm or uneasiness, but talked freely with his unbidden company.

The river forded, the three horsemen ascended the long slope at a trot, and entered the shadows of the woodland.

At that juncture, the bark of a coyote jarred through the forest. It was followed by a rustling sound in the undergrowth bordering the trail, and the two cowboys swung their horses closer beside that bestrode by the traveler, while from the lips of one came the cry:

"Hold, old man! You are a prisoner!"

"Resist, and we shall kill you!"

A double report—a vivid flash, right and left—an oath and a cry of pain, all quickly followed the words, and Major Duncan spurred forward, with the gold-bound butt of a smoking revolver grasped in each hand.

Then a yell of fury rang through the timber, and into the trail bounded three men, each with a coiled lasso in hand.

"Stiddy, pards, an' throw shore; but ef rope fails, use lead," shouted the foremost, none other than Noolan.

"Ho! ho!—down he comes!"

True enough; enmeshed in two of the whirling nooses, Major Duncan was jerked from the saddle, to fall with stunning force.

When consciousness returned, he found himself tied astride of a horse—disarmed, bound and gagged.

On each side was an outlaw, while in advance rode the third, leading two horses, on each of which was strapped a silent and motionless figure.

A half-hour thus, then the party drew rein before a number of buildings, and Noolan said:

"I'm off, now, pards, so hev a keer."

"Shove ther pris'ner in ther old wolf-den an' guard 'im night an' day till Cap'n Brand shows up. After thet—ha! ha!"

The others joined in the ghoulis chuckle, and Noolan rode away.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BLACK BRAVOS.

"Dey's soun' f'm hoof to hohn, boss—'deed dey is! An' not a critter undah sixteen hund'ed—strong, sah. 'Pint yo' bahgain, sah—lump er weigh? Heh? Pick ob de roun'-up, suah!"

"Oh, yas. Ruther a good bunch, I allows, Charcoal. But—how many stolen, ye say?"

"Stolen? Oof! Heah dat, Snow—heah dat!"

"He! he! Gem'men mighty funny, 'pear ter me, Charc! 'Spect we hab ter show 'im de bills, eh?"

"Bill o' sale? Ye got et, then, darkies?"

"Fer suah, boss! Two ob 'em!" in dignantly. "What yo' fink we trabel on?—our shape?"

Foss Martin deigned no reply, just then. Taking the fluttering bits of paper from Charcoal's grimy hand, he went deftly over the panting, bellowing herd, then returned to the two black horsemen at the corral gate, and nodded crisply.

"Thirty-five head, boys, lump at thirty dollars ther head."

The negroes exchanged glances.

"How's dat, Marse Martin? Dar's thirty-eight—"

"Three queer brands I don't want. Won't have 'em! Cut 'em out, an' get 'em away from hyar—quick, Charcoal!"

"We done bought 'em—"

"Don't care! They're dangerous—for

you fellows! D'ye heur? 'Tother bill seems straight. Clear ther queers, then come over to town an' get yer money—ten hundred an' fifty."

Both negroes nodded sullenly, but objected no further. Foss Martin was a man to be feared, and there was a look in his deep-set gray eyes, just then, that both read aright.

Calling a couple of his men to assist the black drovers in cutting out the objectionable animals, the cattleman swung himself into the saddle, and galloped into P—, anxious to reach the bank before it closed for the day.

Soon the drovers appeared. They were an ill-looking pair, tall and powerfully built, black as coal, with heavy, brutal faces and blood-shot eyes. While fully armed, booted and spurred, each was roughly dressed, and wore a huge slouched hat with the brim pinned up in front.

Foss Martin quickly finished his business with them, exacting receipt and bill of sale. That done, the black drovers rode away to a livery stable and put up their horses, while the cattleman quietly sought the marshal.

Talbott was readily found.

"Thar's another big drive on, an' ther vanguard is in," Martin informed him. "Same niggers ag'in."

"With same brand?"

"Yas, thirty-five head o' ther ole Double Star an' Bar—X, f'm ther Nation. But thar was three 'lifts' on a seprate bill, this time, which same ther cusses shore hed ter cut out."

"Brand burned?"

"You're shoutin', Talbott; but no new job."

"And these queer cattle?"

"Ask Curly Kidd. I putt him up ter help split 'em out, an' he's shore onto his job."

"All right, Foss. I'll send the boys along the river at once, and we'll watch night and day. I'd give a full year's pay to corral the gang."

Thus speaking, Marshal Talbott nodded and moved away to post his men and watch the movements of the two negroes.

Charcoal and Snow, evidently, were in no hurry to quit the town. When they had stabled their horses they began gambling and drinking, and devoted the remainder of the day and the greater portion of the night to those questionable pleasures.

At daybreak the marshal and a half-dozen men went out to the sentries posted along the river. They reported all quiet, and were relieved.

The day wore away quietly in the little town. Some time after noon the black drovers again appeared on the street. Both wore a sullen, suspicious air. Tying their horses in a convenient spot, they entered a saloon, and, joined by the roughs lounging about, again began drinking and spending money with lavish hands.

About four o'clock, Charcoal drew one of the ruffians aside, and asked:

"How's de wind?"

"Et's in ther north, Charc'."

"Yo' want some money?"

"Fer shore!"

"Kin yo keep still, an' do a trick?"

"Ev'ry day!"

"Den I'se got fifty dollahs fo' yo'. Git yo' pa'dner, an' go fiah de woods 'long de ribber, 'bout da'k. One go east, one go west, 'bout a mile back, an' string it out er mile er two. See?"

The rough nodded and winked.

"Yer wants ter drive them sentries out," he remarked.

"Yah! Dat's a fac', mebbe. Take yo' money, do yo' trick, an' keep still. 'Mem-bah, jes' at da'k."

Again nodding, the rough thrust the roll of bills into his pocket. A moment later, he beckoned to a man in the crowd and withdrew.

How well the miscreant kept his compact, the reader has seen.

About this time Marshal Talbott encountered Foss Martin on the street and stopped him.

"Well, Foss, I've failed to see Curly Kidd," he announced.

"Yas, I reckon. He's bin in ther bresh all night an' all day, an' jest rode in a half-hour ago."

"And the queer cattle?"

"Down the river eight miles, roped out fer ther gang ter pick up when they slip through with ther main bunch. Coons slipped them away late in the night. Reckon ye kin prove 'em all right, fer Curly, he putt a private brand on 'em what he kin sw'are too."

"Good enough! As the next move, we'd better run in Charcoal and Snow. They're up to the old trick, to divert attention from the river. Listen to that!"

Talbott's face wore a portentous frown as he pointed to the saloon, from the interior of which came whoops and yells, and wild snatches of song.

"Every straggler, every tough, and every idler in the town is there," he continued. "If I had posse enough I'd run in the whole mob, to cool them off in the lock-up!"

The cattleman nodded and quietly followed the marshal into the resort. But notice of their approach had been given by a man at the window, and the more timid, reading Talbott's purpose aright, hastily slipped away through the rear door.

Then the crowd at the end of the bar opened and fell back, and the marshal and his ally found themselves entrapped!

Confronting them, each with a brace of heavy revolvers, cocked, and leveled, stood the two black bravos!

"Slow an' stiddy, gem'men!" warned Charcoal, ever the spokesman of the pair, his bloodshot eyes glowing evilly. "Yo' ha'n't no call ter come a-pushin' dis time, I reckons!"

"Step right up to de bah an' drink my good health!"

"Don' shake yo' heads an' say yo' caln't, gem'mens, foh yo' eder drinks my health, or yo' nebber drinks no mo' at all!"

A murmur of approval came from the roughs ranged around the room—a murmur rendered the more ominous by the clicking of numerous pistol locks, and Talbott's face grew white.

The black desperadoes meant murder, there could be no doubt; that fell intent shone from their reddened eyes, and lurked in each wolfish curl of their heavy lips. Humiliation first, then death!

Talbott's sharp, white teeth met with an audible click, and his eyes glowed with the courage of a fearless soul; yet he was utterly helpless, and he knew it!

And Foss Martin was equally courageous, equally impotent!

A moment thus; then the rear door opened and a man stepped silently across the threshold. A single glance explained the startling scene, and he lightly leaped forward with the warning:

"Steady, Talbott! Steady, all!"

"Hands up, you black scoundrels, or die!"

Alarmed by that stern hail, Charcoal quickly wheeled, and his voice rang out, fierce and despairing:

"Stan' to 'em, Snow, an' shoot straight!"

"Et's Pawnee Bill, an' we's got ter fight!"

His weapon exploded, and the ball buried itself in a wall of the room. Before either bravo could fire again, a double report jarred the building, and the struggle was ended.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PAWNEE'S NIGHT TRAIL.

The steady hand and trained eye of Pawnee Bill, the deputy marshal, had sent his lead true, and the black bravos would never again act as the vanguard and screen of the returning ranch raiders.

A number of the roughs were quickly arrested and removed to the lock-up, where the bodies of the dead outlaws were also taken.

"You've done a mighty good stroke for

the two Territories, not to mention myself, Pawnee," Talbott declared. "Those fellows meant murder, and had me selected as the victim."

"So I saw. There's been a standing order to take them, dead or alive, for three months past. I'll make my report, and I wish you'd send a man in to Guthrie with it and the bodies, Talbott."

"Certainly."

"Then, there's another matter. I dropped into town this morning to see you concerning a Major Duncan, who passed through here two days ago, but you were away."

"Yes. He did pass through just before dark day before yesterday, Pawnee. An old man, going to Tiptop."

"So I learned. Well, he met with foul play a mile or two beyond the river, and is held captive back in the timber. I've got the place located. There were six men there this afternoon, and I want to get help to rescue him."

"You shall have it, and to make the case sure, I'll pick the men myself."

"Good. Get them as soon as you can. I'll be here, ready, in an hour."

Hardly had Marshal Talbott turned away, when an alarm of fire rang through the town, calling every one to the streets. The woodland, both east and west, was burning fiercely, and for some little time the town itself was threatened, although surrounded by fire-guards of burned land.

Then, when the danger was past, it was found that the sentries posted along the river to watch for the approach of the cattle thieves had been compelled, to a man, to abandon their posts and return to town.

"Luck is shore with them cusses," growled Foss Martin. "Ef they slip by now, we'll never find ther mark o' hoof, fer they'll leave ther river an' scatter over ther burnt kentry, whar ashes'll fill ther prents es fast es made."

Both Talbott and Pawnee Bill were forced to admit the truth of the old cattleman's plaint.

Shortly thereafter the marshal reported with six men, well mounted, and armed. The deputy was in readiness, and led the way out of town at a gallop.

Fording the river, the party proceeded direct to the spot where Major Duncan had been captured, two days earlier, then turned westward and rode slowly through the blackened timber.

The better part of an hour was consumed thus, then Pawnee suddenly drew rein, and uttered a sharp cry of disappointment.

Just ahead lay a heap of smoldering ruins, and it was this that had drawn the cry from the deputy.

"There stood their cabin," he explained. "The major was hidden in an old wolf-pit beneath it. But the fire has driven them out, and I must look elsewhere."

"Talbott, the boys may as well go back to town, now. It may be days before I locate the gang again."

"That's true, Pawnee, but if you need help—"

"A still hunt will be better, I believe, Talbott."

"As you will, sir; but, when you are ready for help, call us."

The quarter-blood thanked the marshal, then calmly watched the posse turn and depart.

When they had passed beyond sight and hearing, he dismounted, spoke to his horse, and approached the ruins of the cabin.

The roof had fallen in, and the greater portion of the walls, but the stone chimney yet stood, and in a corner near it a yawning pit was open, showing that the outlaws had carried the prisoner with them in their flight.

That a search for the trail, just then, would be worse than useless the deputy knew, for the steady north breeze constantly stirred and shifted the cinders and ashes with which the ground was covered, quickly filling depressions and obliterating footprints of man and beast.

"Yet they are not far away," Pawnee

mused. "Even nearer, perhaps, than I suspect!"

Calling his horse to follow, he turned and walked away, laying his course toward a barren hill outlined against the western sky, and halted only when he had gained its summit.

This point of vantage commanded a wide stretch of country. Away to the west was a light that he knew came through the window of a house, while off to the northwest was a similar gleam.

This much he saw in a single sweeping glance, and a careful scrutiny failed to add to his discoveries.

"I'll try one, then the other," he muttered. "If both fail, I'll sleep and try for the trail at daylight."

Carefully noting the location of the nearer light, Pawnee mounted and rode toward it. Long ere he reached the foot of the hill, the ray was shut from view, but he held steadily onward, and in a little less than an hour reached the vicinity of the house.

Again leaving his horse, the deputy silently approached the building, a small cabin, and peered in at the open window.

Within, a man was seated at a table, busily engaged in cleaning his weapons. He was a tall, angular fellow, marked by a peculiarly pointed long red beard.

When his gaze fell upon this man, Pawnee started.

A second glance showed that the cabin possessed but the one occupant, and the deputy briskly advanced to the door and stepped inside.

Instantly the red-bearded man jumped to his feet.

"Hold on, Denver Red!" warned Pawnee, sharply. "I've got a mortgage on your life, right here, and if you stir I'll foreclose. Savey?"

"Yer got ther drop, fast enough!" sullenly.

"And mean to keep it. Sit down, Denver, but keep your hands away from those tools. I want to talk to you."

The ruffian scowled wickedly, but complied.

"You've had a fire over at the other place, I see," the deputy continued.

"Whar?"

"You know—beyond the hill, over east. Did you bring the major here?"

"I'm no good at riddles, Pawnee Bill!"

"I've got a dead-or-alive warrant for you, Denver Red! Answer: did you bring the major here?"

"Don't wait till I tells yer, Pard Pawnee!"

The deputy smiled grimly. Then the revolver in his hand cracked, and the heavy bullet grazed the lobe of the ruffian's ear. Up he sprang in sudden terror.

"Fer ther love o' marcy—"

"Did you bring the major here?"

"Yes, yes, Pawnee!"

"Where is he now?"

"Honest, now, I doesn't know. Ther was six o' us thar, an' ther fire run us out. Arter we got hyar, ther chief come along, an' went away with ther others an' ther major."

"The chief, eh?"

"Yes, Cap'n Brand."

"Who's he?"

"I doesn't know—I doesn't know, Pawnee. I'm a new man in ther gang, workin' on trial, an' they doesn't trust me yet."

"And never will, if they're wise! But what direction did they take, Denver?"

"North."

"All right. We'll follow."

The deputy deftly manacled the outlaw, then secured a long piece of stout rope, which he attached to the handcuffs. That done, he extinguished the light, and with his prisoner left the cabin.

Calling up his horse, Pawnee ordered the prisoner to mount and remain silent. Then, with the end of the rope in hand, he laid his course by the north star, and hastened toward the second cabin.

A half-hour's tramp brought the deputy to a small knoll from which he could again see the light, and he ordered Denver Red to dismount.

"I am going to tie you to a tree," he explained in a guarded tone, suiting action to words. "If you make an outcry or attempt to escape, the horse shall kill you."

"Here, Danger! Watch this man. Make him stand, and keep him quiet."

The horse advanced, thrust his nose against the breast of the captive, and uttered a faint whinny.

Denver Red shrank back in terror, and whimpered:

"Lordy, Pard Pawnee! Don't leave me alone with that brute! He'll kill me!"

"Assuredly, if you stir or utter another sound!"

Laughing grimly, the deputy turned and hastened across a wide strip of plowed land lying between the tree and the cabin.

A door was open and moving forms could be seen within. To avoid discovery, Pawnee made a slight detour, and cautiously approached a window in the end of the building.

Voices came through the open casement—the first cool and contemptuous, the second fierce and threatening.

A moment the deputy listened quietly while peering at the scene within. Then he quickly drew a revolver, thrust his hand through the casement, and fired!

CHAPTER XXIV.

GOLDSBUR'S PERIL.

When Detective Goldspur found himself confronted by outlaws in overwhelming force in the old cabin, he promptly shifted a revolver to cover the newcomers and stepped backward, planning to escape through the door by which he had entered.

Three steps thus, then a pistol-lock clicked sharply behind him, and the muzzle of the weapon was pressed firmly against his head.

"Hold hard, stranger, fer ye're up ag'in' et," an ironical voice informed. "Tip up yer flippers, please, till one o' ther gentlemen in front relieves ye o' them shoot-in' irons."

The faintest show of resistance just then meant death swift and sure, and the disguised detective mechanically raised his hands until his weapons pointed to the roof.

"Thet's et—thet's proper an' comfortable! Now, pards!"

A rush followed, and in another minute Goldspur was disarmed.

The two girls witnessed this scene with terror-distended eyes. With the downfall of the daring intruder the hopes that had risen in their hearts died away.

Yet neither had given any sign of recognition, and therein lay Goldspur's only hope.

"There, that will do," the leader of the masked party announced, when the captive's wrists had been securely pinioned. "Cy—Jim, take the major and the girls into the other room and guard them closely. Do not let them talk."

Then men thus singled out obeyed the command, quietly and quickly, and the outlaw chief, waving back the others of his force, at once turned to the detective, crouching beside him, and staring down with gloomy, beady, black eyes.

Stolidly Goldspur returned that stare, subtly distorting the natural lines of his face to lessen the danger of detection, while secretly striving to glimpse the identity concealed by the mask.

Then a baffled scowl crossed the hidden face and the chief spoke:

"Who are you?"

"Lariat Dick," the detective answered in a voice befitting his assumed character.

"Who're yer?"

"Softly! Let us not progress too rapidly. Lariat Dick, eh? Cowboy?"

"F'm ther Panhandle."

"Or the Creek Nation?"

"Panhandle, I said."

"Pardon me! I had an appointment to meet a cowboy detective from the Creek country near here to-night to form plans for stamping out a band of lawless

cattle thieves and brand-burners who have been raiding ranches over there, and who are said to rendezvous near here. I thought you were he, perhaps?"

"Naw!"

"Can it be you're a brand burner?"

"I'm Lariat Dick, Panhandle cowboy, I tells yer—wuss luck!"

"And I don't believe you!"

"Yer don't?"

"I don't!"

"Don't, then!"

"Softly! You are in a bad predicament, my friend. You must clear your skirts."

"F'm what?"

"Suspicion!"

"S'picion?"

"You were engaged in a felonious assault upon the honest settlers residing here when we appeared."

"Yer reckon so?"

"I saw the act."

"But ther mis'abul rascals hed ther gals tied."

"Because those girls were under arrest for aiding and abetting the brand burners!"

"I don see de gals tied an' chipped in, Ole Gimlet eyes."

"You're gallant!"

The purring tones ended with a snarl. Quickly stepping back, the chief addressed each of his followers in an undertone, then covertly watched as they advanced, one by one, and scrutinized the face of the prisoner.

Cool and undaunted, Goldspur returned stare for stare, gibe for gibe. Thus far, his cunning disguise had served him well, and he began to hope that he might escape detection.

Slowly the review dragged, until the last man of the desperate clan had peered keenly into the bronzed face of the captive, and yet no hint of recognition came.

Then one of the masked and cowed figures whispered a sentence in the ear of the chief. A start of surprise, or incredulity, and the beady black eyes again scanned the face of the captive.

But nothing was to be read there, beyond a trace of defiance that anon broke through the skillfully-simulated expression of blank wonderment, and the outlaw leader shook his head, muttering, just above his breath:

"Surely, it can't be, Pallas!"

"I'll stake my life I shaved that head last night, Captain Brand! And I have with me the gold piece that bribed my tongue to silence."

"If it be so—"

"Caution, then, and let us learn in secret."

"Prudent as ever, Pallas. You are right!"

No word of this whispered colloquy reached the ears of Goldspur, although he readily understood that he was the subject discussed.

Turning to his men, Captain Brand told off five, and ordered them to start at once with the prisoners.

"You will keep them apart, and permit no communication between the major and the girls," he explained. "Proceed at once to headquarters, where we shall follow you presently."

That the outlaw chief ruled with an iron hand then became evident. The five desperadoes promptly brought out the prisoners and departed in an orderly manner and without question.

"Now, Pallas, we'll demonstrate the truth or falsity of your theory without further loss of time," Captain Brand explained when the retreating body had passed beyond hearing. "Just hold the lamp for me, will you?"

Pallas complied, with sycophantic eagerness. Seating himself astride of the helpless detective, the captain again peered keenly into that bronzed and seemingly immobile visage.

"It hardly seems possible, Pallas," Brand continued, while the others looked on. "In my experience it is a peculiarity of these bloodhounds to quail when you get them in a tight place. But this fellow doesn't quail."

"All the more dangerous, sir."

"Really? Notice what hideous hair the fellow has, gentlemen—black, long and harsh! Ah—h!"

While speaking in that peculiarly purring tone, Captain Brand had carefully entwined his fingers in the coarse black locks of the detective's wig. The exclamation was preceded by a violent wrench, and he held the artificial covering aloft.

"Gentlemen, you see?"

Then he playfully dashed the mass of hair in the detective's face, exclaiming:

"My dear Goldspur! How do you feel?"

"A precious sight less comfortable than I would be with your carcass elsewhere," was the unmoved retort.

"You no longer lay claim to the title of Lariat Dick, I suppose?"

"No. Unlike yourself, Captain Brand, my own handle is good enough, just now!"

"Gentlemen, you hear! He admits he is that accursed spy, Detective Goldspur, and virtually defies us. What are we to do?"

"There is but one thing we can do," Pallas declared.

"That?"

"Kill him!"

"And you, gentlemen?"

"Pallas is right," the three outlaws agreed.

"So be it, then! Stand back, gentlemen."

Moodily Captain Brand stared down into the unflinching face of the helpless detective. His beady black eyes, gleaming through the holes in his mask, caught an odd glitter from the flame of the lamp, and Goldspur started.

Faint as it was, Brand detected the movement, and his fury, long suppressed, broke forth:

"Accursed spy!" he grated, jerking a knife from its scabbard. "You have almost ruined us, and now you defy us! Well may you quiver, for this blade shall drink your blood!"

"Threatened men live long," Captain Brand!

"Quiver, I say! Beg—plead!"

"Never!—you soulless cur!"

Half rising from the prostrate man, the outlaw leader uttered an oath, and raised the knife to strike.

Then a vivid flash filled the window. A heavy report jarred the air, and the knife, struck by a pistol ball, fell from Captain Brand's hand to the floor!

Before any of the outlaws could move, a nimble figure bounded across the threshold, hat in hand, and the elfish voice of Gimps rang through the room, crying:

"Skip, po'ds—skip quick! Run—run! Thar's fifty men comin'!"

CHAPTER XXV.

GIMPS UNFOLDS A TALE.

A stroke of lightning playing in their midst could scarcely have created confusion and consternation greater than that wrought by the mysterious shot and the words of the urchin.

The outlaws, led by the redoubtable Captain Brand, bounded through the doorway facing the north, just as a number of shots rang out, and quickly disappeared in the darkness.

Prompt as was that disgraceful exit, it was discounted in celerity of movement by Gimps. A sweep of the hat in his hands extinguished the light, and then, grasping the knife, he fairly fell upon Goldspur.

"Mum's ther word, perfessor!" he informed, in a shrill and panting whisper, while groping for the detective's bonds. "Keep up yer nerve! I'm wid yer!"

Then the blade sawed its way through the cords, with more or less damage to cuticle, and Goldspur scrambled to his feet—free.

"Glory to Jasper, perfessor! Wasn't et—"

"Just a minute, Gimps!"

Stopping quickly to the north door, the

detective listened a moment, then turned back, saying:

"They're in full flight, Gimps, and I owe you my life!"

"Sams o' Davis, no! Perfessor, et was ther other feller."

"The other fellow?"

"Ther chap at ther window. An' oh, oo! But that was a dizzy shot! Jest w'en my heart was flutterin' like a geese in ther mud, too!"

"Let me understand you, Gimps. The man at the window—"

"He did ther shootin', perfessor."

"Who was he?"

"Don't know."

"But you saw him—you planned with him?"

"Nit! Et was spontan'us combustion. He planned and I figgered, but I didn't see him till he poked his hand in ther window an' shot."

Goldspur mused a moment.

"Could it have been Pawnee, or was it Lightfoot?" he muttered.

"Not knowin', perfessor, I don't feel ekal ter answer."

"Well we'll drop it for the present, Gimps. The man, whoever he was, has evidently gone in pursuit of Captain Brand and his men. I must do likewise."

"An' I'll keep ye company, perfessor."

"You?"

"Shorely! When et comes ter a thing o' this kind, I reckon I'm ekal ter a bull-rake in a medder."

"It's dangerous, boy. You'd better return to Tiptop."

"I'm jiggered thar, after this little game, perfessor. Besides, I'm bubblin' over with news."

"Very well, I'll hear you presently."

"But what brought you out here, just at this time?"

"Thet's part o' ther news, perfessor."

"Wait, then. Strike a light. My weapons are here, and I must secure them."

Gimps obeyed, and in another minute Goldspur was again in possession of his weapons. When he had replaced his wig, the light was extinguished, and the man and the boy quitted the cabin.

The sounds of horsemen crashing heavily through the undergrowth off to the northwest could be heard, and the detective hastened in that direction, with Gimps at his heels.

They had proceeded but a few rods, however, when a signal call jarred the crisp air, and Goldspur stopped.

"It is Pawnee," he explained, answering the call. "We'll await him here."

The deputy soon appeared, followed by Danger and the prisoner, Denver Red. The two officers briefly compared notes, and the pursuit was resumed.

"Bub, you're keen as a tack," Pawnee commented. "You gave Captain Brand a turn he'll never forget."

"Ner fergive! My, no! But ye're ter blame, Pawnee. Yer gun putt ginger in ther snap, or ther perfessor's cake w'u'd shore 'a' bin dough. Honest, I hed ager in ther knees till yer pop popped."

"It was a brave act, Gimps, and showed both courage and shrewdness," Goldspur asserted, warmly. "I'll never forget it, little pard."

"But come, now—you spoke of news?"

"Yep! Fu'st an' fo'mos'y, Peggs an' his wife hev levanted."

"Skipped?"

"Just at dark, perfessor. They was warned off by Cap'n Brand. I got in ther house when they left, an' found his note. Ye kin read et when ye gits a light."

The urchin thrust a crumpled sheet of paper into the detective's hand, and proceeded:

"Next, One-eyed John hes made a shift in ther program, an' ther weddin' thet was ter be is not ter be. Belmont flunked. Glory ter Goshen! But ther Spaniard was mad, an' he bu'sted ther combination."

"You heard the quarrel, Gimps?"

"Et was in ther air, perfessor, an' I'd

tapped a wire, you bet! Belmont was skeered. We, Us & Co. hed given him ther shivers. Ther game was gittin' shaky, so he tuk ther toboggan ter avoid ther crash."

"I did?"

"Scooted!"

Goldspur whistled softly. The information surprised him.

"Sure, bub?"

"Honest Injun, Pawnee! He bundled up his cash an' pulled fer Guthrie."

"And Spanish John?"

"Argied ag'in et, o' course. But Rupert c'u'dn't stand ther gaff."

"Did they say aught of the girls?"

"Shore! They hed escaped, et seemed, an' Belmont was afeard they'd git back ter Tiptop."

"Umph! I thought the scoundrel had greater nerve."

"Yep. But that wasn't all thet was stewartin' his mind, Pawnee."

"Well, Gimps, explain."

"Ghost o' Jackson! Ain't I?"

"You're doing well, I admit. But proceed."

"Seems they war mixed up in cattle stealin'."

"Ha! That was it, eh?"

"Pop shore. A big drive was due f'm ther east ter-night, an' word hed come thet cowboy-detectives was hot on ther trail o' ther gang. Altogether, et was too much fer Rupert's narves, an' he bolted."

"That was all?"

"No; they cooled down afore they split, an' talked matters over. Spanish John agreed ter quit ther cattle biz ter-night, an' ef all went smooth he'd putt a pusal in ther K. C. papers."

"What was it? Do you know?"

"R.—Drouth bu'sted.—B."

"And then?"

"Then Rupert sh'u'd come back an' partake of ther fatted calf."

"Good boy!" cried Pawnee, approvingly. "You're a brick!"

"They didn't say so."

"They suspected you, eh?"

"Like tacks. They agreed thet Spanish John sh'u'd bring me out with him ter-night, cluck me over ther head an' drap me in ther quicksands."

"The miserable scoundrels!" exclaimed both officers in a breath.

Gimps chuckled, then added:

"But et didn't work!"

"Happily, no!" said Goldspur. "But concerning the girls, Gimps—did you learn Spanish John's intentions?"

"Yer caught ther tide, perfessor! They'll be held fer ransom, an' this Major—Major—"

"Duncan?"

"Yep; he foots ther bill. Privately, I think Spanish John will travel fer his health soon es he gits ther cash, an' leave ther gang in ther lurch."

"Was he at the cabin, back there?"

"Not shore, but I think so. They left me with ther hosses."

Meanwhile the party had been pushing steadily onward, and were now near the spot where Goldspur had left his prisoner. Bidding the others to push ahead, he turned aside and secured the outlaw.

It was some little time before he succeeded in rejoining his companions. Then he found them at fault.

"They had dismounted and separated to baffle pursuit," Pawnee explained.

"Not a sound is to be heard, and we are balked till morning."

"Unless one of these prisoners can be made to talk," added Goldspur quickly.

"Delay now may be fatal to both your case and mine. A very few hours may suffice to put both the captives and the cattle far beyond our reach."

The deputy agreed to this view of the matter, and after a brief conference they began beating about for a suitable camping place.

A secure location was soon found in the bend of a dry canyon. There a fire was kindled, the prisoners were more securely bound, and the officers sat down to decide upon a plan of action.

Scarcely had they seated themselves thus when a feeble step was heard, and a man, bloodstained and grimy, reeled into view, and sank inertly before the fire.

Goldspur cast a startled glance at that pallid face, then leaped to his feet, with the cry:

"By the Powers! It is Luke Lightfoot!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PRISONER TALKS.

Yes, it was, indeed, the trailer, wounded and bleeding, and his face, hands, and clothing revealed that he had within the past few minutes been engaged in desperate strife.

He nodded faintly as the detective's cry of recognition rang out, and said:

"Yes, 'tis I, Goldspur. But the brand-burners came very near making an end of me."

"I got the ponies of Old Abe, the Iowa, and returned to the beached canoe, but you and the girls were gone."

"Then I hid the animals, and hunted around for an hour or more, hoping to find some trace of you, but vainly."

"Just as I had given up and decided to wait till morning to lift the trail, I stumbled blindly upon five outlaws hurrying through the woods, with three captives. The two girls I recognized, and I believed the third prisoner to be yourself."

"Taken by surprise and with the odds terribly against me, I was quickly beaten into insensibility and left for dead. When I revived, I discovered this fire, crept up, and saw who you were."

"Those are the facts in a nutshell, Goldspur, and I say now that if the girls are to be rescued there is not an hour to lose."

"The outlaws were headed for the river, and it is my belief they intended to take canoes and thus thwart any attempt at trailing."

"No time shall be needlessly lost, I assure you, Lightfoot, but to attempt pursuit just now would be a random move. We must wait until we can proceed with certainty, or risk a costly blunder."

"Brace up, now, and I'll look to your hurts, for you have indeed fared badly."

"Mere scratches, for the most part, I think, though I did get one ugly stroke over the head, which pains me severely," the trailer returned, and Goldspur found this a fairly accurate description of the case.

Handkerchiefs, some bits of adhesive plaster, and a small flask of brandy contributed by Pawnee, coupled with some really skillful work on Goldspur's part, served to get Lightfoot into comfortable shape, presently, whereupon he announced himself ready, once more, for fight or frolic.

Then the detective and the deputy stepped aside to renew the discussion broken off by the trailer's sudden appearance.

A very few minutes sufficed to decide the matter.

A second fire was kindled a short distance up the canyon, and Goldspur's prisoner taken there.

The fellow, evidently alarmed by this move, shivered violently, then steadied himself, and resolutely averted his face when forced to seat himself beside the fire.

"Easy, my man," cautioned Goldspur. "Resistance is not only useless, but foolish. You are in the grip of the law."

"Much I keers fer that!" retorted the outlaw in a croaking tone, assumed to disguise his voice. "Yer'll find me game ter ther finish."

"You are a cattle thief?"

"That ain't bin proved!"

"But will be."

"'Twon't be no hangin' matter."

"No."

At that point the prisoner attempted a furtive glance at the detective. Their eyes met, and with a harsh laugh the outlaw flung up his head and stared defiantly at the officer.

Bruised by the blow from Goldspur's rifle butt a short time before, his face was almost unrecognizable; yet the detective knew the man, and added:

"But you are charged with other crimes."

"Which yer mean ter say—"

"Robbery, and—yes, murder!"

The fellow shivered and his eyes fell.

"Understand, I know you, Jack Rabbit, and know where you are wanted worst. There is a price on your head!"

"Then I am doomed!" suddenly dropping the vernacular and speaking in his natural voice. "Say the worst, Goldspur, and have done with it—Curse you!"

"Slowly, Jack—let us speak plainly and understand each other."

"You offer terms?"

"Not yet."

"I am innocent of murder—I swear it!"

"I have reason to believe you, Jack."

A peculiar click sounded in the fellow's throat, and he shivered again. Then his head dropped and he stared moodily at the fire.

"It is useless—all useless," he growled, after a moment. "I am in the net and that ends it, though God knows I am innocent of that double charge. Another hand than mine robbed and killed the man."

"I believe you, Jack."

"Believe me? Then, in Heaven's name, what mean you?"

"That we must understand each other."

"Goldspur, tell me what you want!"

"Your help."

"If I give it?"

"You shall have mine in return."

"I agree to that. Proceed."

"You are a brand-burner?"

"Yes, and no! Driven by circumstances, I have fallen in with the band, but as yet have committed no act of outlawry."

"The night of the tragedy in the camp on the Arkansas, I fled south into the Cherokee Outlet, where I fell in with Denver Red, a ruffian I had often met in the mines. Like myself, he was in trouble, and we held on together, laying our course for the Cimarron, where, he assured me, he had friends. We arrived only a few days ago. When I learned the character of these friends, I would have continued my flight but for one thing."

"In the chief of the band I recognized the man who had charged me with the murder."

"Is it possible?"

"I cannot be mistaken, sir. This same man was in camp that night, I feel assured, and it was with the hope of fastening the crime upon him that I decided to remain."

"Ah! You have cleared my mind of one point, Jack!"

"And that, sir?"

"For an hour past I have been wondering where I had met this Captain Brand. Now, I know it was in the camp on the Arkansas."

"You've seen the captain, then?"

Goldspur briefly explained.

"Then, sir, if I may hazard a guess, you partially recognized the man through his eyes—one a dull, sombre black, the other beady, glittering, and sinister. Is it not so, sir?"

"Exactly, Jack. Now, his identity?"

"I know him only as Captain Brand. I have seen him but once."

"And the band?"

"It is strong and well organized, and everything, I understand, is reduced to a system. The cattle nearly all come from ranches in the Creek Nation. Returning from these forays, the band make it a rule to come up the Cimarron, crossing frequently, and, when practicable, driving for miles in the shallow water to baffle pursuit."

"Some place above here is a creek, in which is a dam with a flood-gate. When the cattle reach the mouth of this creek, the flood-gate is closed, so the water below quickly empties into the river. Then

the creek bed is used for a drive-way, and the gate again opened, restoring the stream to its normal proportions and washing out the trail.

"Understand, Goldspur, I do not vouch for the correctness of this information. It is all hearsay, picked up among the men."

"I understand, sir."

"The cattle will reach the brand-burners' corral some time to-night, where everything will be in readiness. To-morrow the herd will be rebranded, driven off in small bunches, and sold in the towns along the Santa Fe as soon as practicable."

This statement caused Pawnee to start uneasily, and he bent a sharp glance on the captive.

"You are sure of that?" he asked.

"I have repeated just what I heard, sir."

"The information is correct, I judge," Goldspur averred, and he recounted the conversation he had overheard between Noolan and Dandy Dave on the river bank.

"Then we must round up the rascals to-morrow, or I shall have to own myself beaten!"

"Precisely, Pawnee."

"The deputy turned to the prisoner and asked:

"Is the corral near?"

"It is not many miles distant, sir, and is south of the river. More than that I do not know."

"What force will be there?"

"Probably a dozen men."

"More than we could handle, I fear, for they are desperate fellows."

"Goldspur, if you will remain in camp here, I'll ride to P—, secure help, and return before morning."

"That is our only hope, Pawnee."

The two officers drew aside and held a whispered consultation. When this was ended the deputy secured his horse and departed.

Just as Goldspur resumed his seat, Gimps appeared with a brief message from Lightfoot.

As the lad concluded, he glanced at the prisoner. Then his face paled and his eyes gleamed fiercely.

"What is it, Gimps?"

Clear as a bugle call came the reply:

"That man, sir—Jack Rabbit, the sport!"

"'Twas he who killed and robbed my father!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A GLANCE BACKWARD.

Nearly a month prior to the scene just described, in a cottonwood grove on the banks of the Arkansas River, one night, a number of men were encamped.

These men were freighters and travelers, journeying in various directions, and all stopping for the night at this one spot, because of the abundance of wood, water, and grass to be found there.

The numerous camp-fires blazing through the grove showed many vehicles scattered about, while in the edge of the plain back of the timber a large number of horses were picketed.

As the night advanced, many of the fires died out; but near the centre of the grove one was kept blazing high, while near it on a wagon sheet, beneath a number of lanterns, six men sat gambling.

The game was for high stakes, and the spectators looked on with intense interest, fearful that out of the play a tragedy would spring, for three of the players were of ill repute, and notorious along the border as desperate men.

But the game ended at last, and without hard words. A stranger had won—a man of cool, decisive manner, whom the roughs seemed to fear, for they permitted him to depart without challenge.

This man was Goldspur, disguised as a rancher. As he moved away from the central fire to turn in for the night he

"What peculiar eyes the fellow had! In disguise, too, and a thorough rascal!"

"I did well to note his features carefully, for we shall meet again, I feel."

Then he looked to his horses, which were tethered in the grove, took a couple of blankets from his pack saddle, prepared a bunk between two trees, and lay down.

At this moment a man and a boy descended from a white-topped wagon near by, and approached the detective.

"Sir," said the man in a cautious voice, "I've come ter putt ye on yer guard. Them chaps over yonder are outlaws, some o' them, an' ye'll do well ter sleep with an eye open."

"Ye won good money from them ter-night, an' showed much more, so be keerful, or they'll get all afore day."

"Thank you, my friend. I'll heed your warning, for I have no desire to be robbed, I assure you," the detective replied, and a moment later the man and the boy turned back to their wagon.

Goldspur meant to be as good as his word, for the appearance of the men around the fire had aroused his suspicions before the warning was given, but, wearied by a day's hard riding, he quickly fell into a doze, from which he was suddenly awakened by a heavy weight upon his chest—a stifling clutch on his throat.

He attempted to cry out, but the shout did not rise above a hollow gasp. Then he became conscious of a swift pattering of feet near by, just as a crushing blow left him senseless.

When consciousness returned the detective found himself surrounded by a half-dozen friendly faces, and at once sat up, bewildered.

"Well?" he asked.

"They tried to rob ye," some one explained.

"Who did?"

"Ther sport, Jack Rabbit."

"Yes. I remember something now. Tell me of it."

"Half a dozen voices arose at once.

"You tell me," the detective requested, laying his hand on the arm of the one who had first spoken. "Silence, all!"

"Wal, ther sport hed ye fast enough, but Solomon Gimps caught on—"

"Solomon Gimps?"

"Yas; ther man with a boy in a wagon clost by whar ye laid. He see'd ther thing, an' jumped out. Then the sport clipped ye over ther head with his pistol butt, an' made fer Solomon, an' knifed an' robbed him. He'd a got you, too, but ther boy, wakened by ther fracas, raised an alarm just as he turned back, an' ther critter hed ter skip."

"The boy recognized Jack Rabbit?"

"No; et was dark thar. But a man saw ther sport prowlin' 'round whar ye lay a bit before et happened."

"Ah, you've got the sport, then?"

"No; we hed him, but while we fixed a rope ter hang him, he made a break an' got away."

"He denied it, of course?"

"O' course. They allers do."

"And this man—who was he?"

"Don't know his name. He's ther chap with ther queer eyes, who, lost so much ter-night."

"He's here, I suppose?"

"Yes, somewhar around."

"Bring him here, will you?"

Four of the men hurried away. They were gone some little time, and came back one by one. All had the same report.

The man with the strange eyes was missing!

Meanwhile the freighter remaining beside the detective had continued:

"An' Solomon Gimps, he's dead."

"Dead! Poor fellow! I am sorry to hear that. So his attempt to serve me cost him his life?"

"Yes, sir; an' et's sad, too, fer et leaves ther kid alone in ther world."

"No, not alone, my man, for while I live that shall not be said. Where I go, he shall go, and my home shall be his home."

"Fetch him here, will you?"

"I am here, sir. I have heard your

kindly words, and I thank you with all my heart," a firm, though boyish, voice responded, and into view stepped the lad.

His face was pale, with eyes red and swollen, but there was that in the youthful visage and clear gray eyes which won the detective's approval, and he beckoned the boy toward him.

"Leave us, for the present," he requested, and the freighters obeyed, while Goldspur drew the boy to a seat beside him.

"Now, my lad—your name?" he asked.

"Joseph Gimps, sir."

"Age?"

"Fourteen."

"You live near here?"

"Until a month ago, sir, I lived in St. Louis. Since that time I have traveled with my father."

"Is it true, Joseph, that your father's death leaves you alone?"

"It is perfectly true, sir."

"Are you willing to accompany me?"

"When I have avenged my father's death, I shall be, sir."

"Boy, that duty falls to me. He gave his life in defense of mine."

"Sir, the duty is mine, but I shall be glad of your assistance."

"Very well, Joseph, you shall have it."

"I thank you, sir."

"Now, Joseph, I will tell you a secret. I am a detective."

"I knew as much, sir."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; I heard two men talking last night, in whispers. They said you were Detective Goldspur."

"Your report is far from flattering, Joseph. I supposed myself unknown."

"But the men—are they here now?"

"No, sir. They were leaving camp when I overheard them. It was just after the gambling ceased."

"Well, well! But how would you like to become a detective, boy?"

"Above all things, sir! Then I could surely trace down my father's slayer."

"Can you act the gamin?"

"I can, yes, sir."

"Very well; when we leave here, that shall be your role. I shall call you Gimps."

With this brief retrospect in mind, let us turn again to the scene beside the canyon camp fire.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GIMP'S DISCOVERIES.

Jack Rabbit, the captive sport, half rose from his seat as that damaging charge pealed from the lips of the boy, and flung up his hands, as if warding off a blow, then met Goldspur's gaze with an appealing look.

"Slowly, little pard," the detective cautioned, gripping the shoulder of his protégé. "The man's Jack Rabbit, fast enough, but—is he the guilty one?"

"Surely, sir—"

"Careful, now! Come at it step by step!"

"He was accused that night, sir!"

"Accused, yes; but where's the proof against him?"

"He was seen prowling around the place you slept with his knife—"

"All a lie—a foul, black lie, patched up by that demon with the odd eyes!" hotly interrupted the captive. "He was the guilty man, Goldspur. Boy, I never injured your father!"

"Yet you fled that night!"

"As would any man have done!"

"'Twas said to be a sign of guilt."

"Bah! My life was menaced. Judge Lynch and a rope's end stared me in the face. What chance had I to prove my innocence?"

"Very little. That is true, Jack Rabbit."

Gimps spoke despondently, and turned to the detective.

"Jack Rabbit is innocent, little pard," Goldspur assured. "When we find the man who accused him, we shall have the man we want."

"The chase seems hopeless, sir. I fear we may never chance upon him."

"Don't be discouraged. The end is nearer than you think."

"Sir, you have clues!"

"Yes, Gimps, two. In Captain Brand I have recognized the man with the odd eyes."

"And the other?"

"It is less important—faint, indeed, as it stands."

The detective thrust his hand into an inner pocket and brought forth a small oblong package. Taking the cords from around it, he carefully removed several folds of tough manilla paper, and held up a bit of steel, some three inches in length.

"Merely a piece of broken knife blade," he explained.

"Where did you get it, sir?"

"From your father's breast."

Gimps shuddered, then mechanically seized the gruesome bit of metal, and knelt near the fire.

A swift flash of intelligence crossed his face, and he hastily drew some object from his pocket.

In another instant Goldspur was kneeling beside him. The lad held the missing portion of the blade, and quickly fitted the pieces together!

"Read it!" muttered Gimps, huskily, handing the broken weapon to Goldspur. "There's a name on it!"

True enough! Traced with an acid on the face of the blade was the name:

JUAN BARMILLO.

"I know the man!" Goldspur asserted, when he had pronounced the name.

"And I! 'Tis Spanish John!"

"Right! But where found you this hilt?"

"In the room above the Silver Shades. Yesterday the gambler put it in the stove. When he turned his back, I took it out."

"Prompted by what? Surely you didn't suspect—"

"I didn't suspect this. No, sir. But I believed the broken blade was dangerous to him, so I determined to carry it to you."

"Good, my boy! You have avenged your father!"

"I trust so, sir. But I do not understand. Spanish John was there that night?"

"Yes, in disguise."

"But the missing eye, sir?"

"He wore one of glass, as he does tonight in the role of Captain Brand."

"Then he was the man with the queer optics, and charged Jack Rabbit with the crime to divert suspicion from himself?"

"Precisely."

Gimps turned to the captive sport and quickly extended his hand, saying:

"Forgive me, Jack Rabbit! I accused you wrongfully."

"Freely, boy. I owe you no malice. Like yourself, I have cause to hate Spanish John, so you may count myself your friend."

Then the trio discussed the matter briefly, and Goldspur decided to release the sport.

About this time Gimps returned to the lower fire, where Lightfoot was guarding Denver Red. A peculiar change had come over the lad, and he moved about restlessly.

He was far from contented just then.

Presently he addressed a few words to the trailer, turned, and quickly disappeared, going toward the river.

A short distance down the canyon Gimps clambered up one of the sloping walls, struck across the burned woodland, and finally entered a range of low hills.

On the crest of one of these wooded knolls he halted a moment for rest and reflection. Then an idea came to him; nimbly ascending a tall post oak, he perched himself in its topmost branches.

Surrounding him on every side was a vast, dark void, unrelieved for the moment by a single ray of light.

Then suddenly away off to the southwest there came a twinkling gleam, moving slowly through the darkness. Almost as soon as seen it disappeared—only to flash out again further away.

"It's a man with a lantern," Gimps muttered, lapsing into the gamin once more. "Hullo! That's another!"

This was true; a second light had appeared. Then quickly followed a third, a fourth, and a fifth.

"A reg'lar lawn party!" The urchin commented. "Sams o' Davis! I b'lieve et's ther brand-burners! See them lanterns swing! Signals, b'gum! Ef thet's their layout, I'll spot et quick."

For some little time the boy remained aloft, watching the distant lights. Finally four of them became stationary, while the fifth moved on and disappeared.

Satisfied at length that nothing more could be discovered from his position in the tree top, Gimps descended, fixed his course by the stars, and hastened in the direction he had seen the lights moving.

After a half-hour's brisk walk, he forded a small stream and ascended a hill. From the summit the lights were again visible, now creeping through the gloom in a southerly direction.

Nothing daunted the young trailer tightened his belt and quickened his pace.

"Et's ther brand-burners, fast enough!" he told himself. "Reckon they've got a bunch o' steers, too. Glory ter Jasper! How I'd like ter round 'em up, all by my lonesome! Wouldn't ther perfessor's eyes snap, tho'!"

Down the hill and across a valley, sped the lad, then out upon a stony waste, rarely losing sight of the lantern for more than a minute, until he was at least five miles from the canyon camp. Then the lights suddenly faded from view.

Bewildered for the moment, Gimps paused.

"I don't ketch on," he muttered. "Howbeit, hyar goes ter see!"

Cautiously now, yet rapidly, he moved forward. Presently a medley of sounds floated faintly through the night, growing louder and gradually resolving into the trampling of hoofs, the bellowing of cattle, and the shouting of men as the lad advanced.

Then it all became clear. The cattle thieves had arrived at their rendezvous!

A few minutes later Gimps reached the point where the lights had faded from view and found himself on the verge of a huge draw, which ran back into the timber bordering that stony waste on the west.

Skirting this draw, he pushed on into the timber a few hundred yards, then halted, with a chuckle of delight.

Just below him was a large corral, confining the stolen cattle. Near the upper end of this inclosure and distinctly visible in the glow of half a dozen fires was a long chute!

"Glory ter Jasper! They must be in something of a hurry!" the urchin mused, eyeing the men moving about. "An'—Hullo! That's a house, too!"

True enough; in a small clearing a short distance above the draw stood a long, cabin, surrounded on three sides by outbuildings.

After a moment's reflection, Gimps crossed a fire-guard of plowed land and stole cautiously toward the house. It had occurred to him that the captives might be here and he was determined to learn the truth.

Making a slight detour, the lad got among the outbuildings, then stealthily dodged along until he reached the rear of the cabin. Here he found a door and two windows. The first was closed and heavy curtains screened the windows.

However, a faint stream of light pierced the darkness, and Gimps found that it came from a small rent in one of the curtains. Pulling himself up, he placed his eye as near the orifice as the sash would permit.

At that precise moment a door on the opposite side of the house opened and a man was thrust into the room. His hands were fastened at his back, and a short rope ran from one ankle to the other.

A single glance was sufficient to establish the identity of the prisoner, and Gimps shrank back in dismay.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CAPTAIN BRAND AGAIN.

Some little time after Gimps had quitted the canyon camp, Goldspur extinguished the upper fire, and with Jack Rabbit rejoined Lightfoot below.

The detective's first inquiry was for the boy.

"Gone," the trailer replied. "He went toward the river, saying he'd return presently."

A slight frown crossed Goldspur's face and he cast an uneasy glance down the canyon. Then he picked up his rifle.

"It's pretty risky for him, down there. I'll look him up. Keep quiet till I come back."

In another minute, he, too, had vanished.

The detective followed the canyon toward the river, pausing at intervals to utter a signal with which Gimps was familiar. But no response came, and within a half-hour the searcher reached the Cimarron.

"It is singular. I don't understand it, at all," he told himself, as he glanced across the dark stream. "Something must have drawn him away. What was it?"

No answer presented itself to the puzzled detective, and he ascended the sloping bank of the canyon, determined to make a considerable detour in search of his young protege ere rejoining his companions.

A few paces carried him into the old Indian trail which he had traveled the preceding afternoon, and he moved briskly along, going up the river.

He had reached a point about four hundred yards west of the canyon, when a disagreeable surprise greeted him.

A number of men leaped out of the blackened undergrowth bordering the trail, and in less than the time it takes to tell it he was in their clutches, and helpless!

Quickly stripping him of his weapons, his captors bound his hands. Then:

"Now, boys, bring up the horses, two of you, while I take a look at the cuss."

"Pallas, strike a light, will you? It runs in my head that we've drawn the prize number, this time!"

These words were in the voice of Captain Brand, and Goldspur silently anathematized the blind folly which had led him into the trap.

"I might have known better! But, it's done, and can't be undone," he mused. "Catch me again, will you!"

Just then a match flared in the darkness, and the cowed heads of Pallas and the captain were thrust close to the detective's face.

"Aha! Good Pallas, my presentiment was right, you see! It is indeed our friend, Lariat Dick, alias Hercules Goldspur!"

"How kind is Fate, after all! Here, and just when our appetite for revenge is whetted to the keenest!"

"Ah, Goldspur, you are an obliging fellow! I owe you my thanks, and I beg that you accept them. We were debating whether to return to the cabin in search of you, and here you come! Could anything be more charming? Really, you are a good fellow—magnan—"

"Ouch!"

That ejaculation, closely coupled with a howl of agony, broke the mocking strain, and Captain Brand went down under the impact of a sudden blow from Goldspur's head, while Pallas, struck by a shoulder, reeled aside.

"Ba-ah!" bleated the detective, in grim derision, as he bounded lightly from the trail, to disappear in the thick undergrowth.

"Catch him!—stop him!" screamed Brand, frantic with pain and rage. "Pallas! Pallas! Curse you, man! Can't you stir?"

"Ay!" from beneath the cowl, and the disguised barber plunged through the undergrowth in pursuit of the fleeing prey. "This way! Help—all!"

There was little need for that appeal, just then, for every one of the outlaws was in the chase, the captain excepted. Over log and rock, through thicket and open, they sped, guided by intuition rather than by sight or sound.

For the moment, it seemed that the desperate dash would win the detective his freedom. So sudden, so wholly unexpected, had been that flying start, that he was fully a hundred feet away ere a step was taken in pursuit. With his hands free, the darkness would have favored him, and escape would have been reasonably sure; with his hands tied at his back, the dense gloom was against him, and he was lost.

A hundred yards from the scene of his capture, Goldspur tripped on a root, stumbled and fell. He attempted to save himself, but in vain. His head struck a tree, and all became blank.

Two or three minutes passed. Then a triumphant yell started the echoes, apprising the chief that the game was again won, and presently the men reappeared, bearing the unconscious detective on their shoulders.

"Dead or living?" snarled Captain Brand, hand on knife, as he noted the limpness of the form they lowered. "Speak out, curse you! If he's croaked—Who robbed me of revenge?"

"Alive yet, chief, but bad stunned by a fall, I reckon. He tripped—"

"Alive! You're sure, Pallas?"

"His heart beats, man, and I can find no serious wound."

"Good! Excellent! Now, boys—the horses. We'll take this hound straight to the lion's den, and let him face the noble game he's dogged. Ha! ha!"

"You're hurt, chief?"

"Hurt? Yes, Pallas, but I'll have sweet salve for the blow!"

A moment later, the men came up with the horses. Then Goldspur was bound upright in a saddle, a man mounted behind him, and the party briskly started forward.

Ere they had proceeded a mile, the bracing night air revived the detective, and he quickly realized that he was again in the hands of the brand-burners.

Feigning continued unconsciousness, he stealthily tested his bonds. But they had been applied and knotted with the utmost care, and refused to slip or give.

"I'm certainly due to remain in the scoundrel's clutches for a while yet," he thought. "Well, while there's life, there's hope, and I'm not dead yet—thank Heaven!"

Arrived at the rendezvous, Captain Brand ordered the men to dismount, and detailed two to attend to the horses, then continued:

"Pallas, get that hound out of the saddle, then assist me in getting him into the house. I will see to his condition and his bonds myself, for there must be no escape."

Then the detective spoke:

"Don't trouble yourself on my account, gentlemen. Allow me to remark, your tender regard for my welfare is really touching!"

"Yes—it'll go right to your heart!" retorted Captain Brand, significantly.

"Come, Pallas—pull him down, and hopple him."

The ruffian obeyed. Then each seized an arm, and Goldspur was forced across a stretch of open ground. On reaching the house, the door was flung open, and he was pushed inside.

Leaving Pallas to guard the captive for the moment, Captain Brand seized the lamp and passed into the adjoining room.

What he saw there was evidently highly gratifying, for he returned chuckling, and paused in the doorway to turn his head and say:

"It's all right, dear brother—all right, I assure you! Glad you like it. Make yourself at home, and if there's anything you need to conjure up the old time, or to stimulate your memory, don't hesitate to call for it. Au revoir!"

Then the miscreant carefully closed the

door, put down the light, and turned to the detective and his warden.

"You may go, now, Pallas," he said, quietly. "Tell the boys to work briskly, and to shove out the different bunches as rapidly as possible, for something warns me that danger threatens. Have Noolan to clear the corral by noon at any hazard, and see that the branding chute is taken down and gotten out of sight. We'll not use it again for months, if ever."

Pallas nodded and withdrew.

Slowly, Captain Brand locked the door, and motioned Goldspur to a chair.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you. Now that you're in the lion's den, I want to hear how you like it."

"Not so well as I might under different circumstances, Juan Barmillo."

"Ha! You know, then—"

"All, Spanish John."

The outlaw regarded the detective curiously. Then he advanced, and deftly searched him. Nothing of importance was brought to light. Yet, Goldspur noticed a tremor run through Captain Brand's sinewy form when he held up the broken bowie.

"It is needless to ask how you obtained that, I suppose? You were there that night, I remember, and so got the point of the blade. But, the haft?"

"I cannot say, at present."

"Will not fit the case better! Through the son, I suspect. Yes, that is it. He took it from the stove, and carried it to you. So much for yielding to a feeling of philanthropy! I should have strangled the imp as soon as he appeared in Tip-top!"

"But, really, it doesn't matter. You have the tell-tale weapon, and I have you."

"What I desire to impress upon you is, your race is run!"

"Before you take your trip into Shadowland, however, I want you to see and hear a few things. Presently, I shall take you to the corral, and let you see just how we operate. It will give me pleasure to make you acquainted, also, with each member of our band. It will teach them caution when we resume operations, later on."

"Then, there is another matter. We have here a client of yours, and I wish you to hear a business proposition I have to make to him."

"Come."

Captain Brand rose and flung open the door of the adjoining apartment, then took up the lamp and followed Goldspur, who, hampered by the rope on his ankles, walked very slowly.

As the steel-nerved detective crossed the threshold, he saw, in the opposite corner, on a pallet of straw, the figure of a man.

It was Major Duncan, bound and gagged!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PRISONERS.

Placing the lamp on a wall shelf, Captain Brand drew a knife and stepped to the major's side.

"Don't be alarmed, dear brother! The blade is not for you—just now! How you tremble! Let us remove that nasty gag. There—that is better!"

"You merciless devil! you—"

"Don't choke, I beg! Ah, you are excited! Quiet, now, and cool down. I've brought a mutual friend to see you—you—yourself!"

Captain Brand was bending over the veteran, with hand playfully chucking the latter's grizzled chin. But his voice rose a trifle with each word; then, with a forward lunge, he savagely clutched Duncan's throat and shook him violently, grating:

"You won't tremble, eh? You will defy me, eh? Well—we'll see!"

"Drop that, you coward!"

Releasing the major's throat, Brand turned to the indignant detective.

"You too, eh?" he sneered. "Well, that's pretty good, from a man in your fix

But you're not far wrong! Candidly. I wouldn't care to try the trick with the major's hands untied!"

"But, all this is neither here nor there. We're losing time. In your companion in misfortune you have doubtless recognized your employer, Major Nathan Duncan."

"Nate, old boy, allow me to introduce your friend and co-worker, Detective Goldspur."

The veteran started, and half rose from the pallet, muttering:

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, major, it is I," Goldspur affirmed.

"This destroys my last hope!"

"It is not so bad as that, major. We live yet!"

"But are helpless."

"We both have powerful friends. Don't despair."

Captain Brand laughed ironically, and retorted:

"Really, Goldspur, your powerful friends can avail you nothing. You will be beyond the reach of human influence long before this den is found. As for the major—"

"Nate, old boy, are you ready for a business proposition?"

"I am compelled to hear what you say, Juan Barmillo."

"Delightful, isn't it? So changed from the old time, when I was compelled to endure your hectoring! Really, yes! But—about money, now. You are prepared to settle, I suppose?"

"Settle?"

"Yes, for the eye your agents destroyed—curse you! Do you think I shall ever forget the score against you?"

"Your own evil deeds cost you your eye, Juan Barmillo. For your sister's sake, when we were married, I gave you an important position. When you betrayed that trust and to save the family honor I screened you. And you requested that act, wretched ingrate, by attempting to seize the mine. You planned and made the attack with the utmost deliberation. In the struggle you lost your eye. The fault is with you alone."

"A pretty tale, truly!" with a sneer. "But I deny it in toto, Nate Duncan, and demand ten thousand dollars for the eye. It was lost in your service, and you must pay."

"Then, there is another matter. In order to get you where I could collect the bill, I have been at heavy expense. This expense you must foot. It amounts to an additional ten thousand. Don't wince! You are able to pay, and pay you shall!"

"Never!"

"Slowly—do nothing rashly. Remember, we're not through yet, for there is another item."

"Your daughter—"

"Scoundrel! Miserable, heartless scoundrel! You stole my child!"

With that half-frantic cry, Major Duncan struggled to rise, but fell weakly against the wall. His stern old face wore the pallor of death, but his dark eyes were aglow with vengeful fury.

Captain Brand nodded coldly.

"Yes, I stole your child. Rather, I employed a tool—one Esau Black. She lives, and I have kept an eye on her for many years."

"Recently, I ordered her brought here. She is here now, and in my power. A third ten thousands buys her liberty!"

"Ruby! My poor Ruby!"

"She is here, I say, Nate Duncan. She is within reach of your voice. Yet never again shall you see her, unless you accede to the demands I have made, and pledge yourself to pay the sum of thirty thousand dollars. I need only add: You know I make no idle threats!"

"That is true, Juan Barmillo. You are a pitiless monster! On one condition, I will deal with you."

"And that?"

"Detective Goldspur must be freed."

"I decline to accept that condition!"

"Ten thousand dollars—"

"Ten times ten thousand wouldn't free him! A few hours ago I might have accepted. Now, his life cannot be bought!"

"Then not a dollar of my money touches your hand!"

"We shall see!"

"My reply is final."

"Major Duncan, leave me out of the question," Goldspur requested, earnestly. "The scoundrel tells you the truth. Your daughter is a captive, and your life and honor are at stake. Buy your liberty, and that of your child. Forget, for the present, that I exist."

"He will kill you, Goldspur!"

"It is barely possible. Do not think of me. Look only to the future of your daughter and yourself."

"That, I refuse to do! Betray a friend? By the Lord of Hosts—never!"

"Barmillo—cutthroat! You may do your worst! I defy you! You have plotted for revenge and a fortune, and you are balked!"

Clear as a bugle rang the voice of the veteran, and his eyes flashed with scorn and detestation.

Shrinking back, Captain Brand uttered an inaudible oath. Slowly crossing the room, he picked up the lamp to depart, then paused on the threshold, and said:

"Nate, old boy, you have till sunrise to consider my proposition. If at that hour you are still decided to reject it, you may say your prayers!"

The outlaw then passed from the room, and closed and locked the door, leaving the prisoners shrouded in darkness. A moment later, they heard him quit the house.

Then Goldspur spoke:

"Major, you must make up your mind to accept that villain's offer. There is hardly one chance in ten thousand that we'll be rescued before day. Only—deal so he can't trick you!"

"Never, sir!"

"But your daughter, major! Surely—"

"Man, that is merely a ruse. I am confident, now, she died long ago!"

"No, no! She lives."

"Good heavens! The letter was true, then? You have seen her? Tell me, man!"

"The letter was true, and I have seen her. Yes."

"And she—Curse it, man! Can't you talk?"

"A little lady, Major. But that demon spoke the truth. She is a captive."

A groan burst from Major Duncan's lips, and he sank limply upon the pallet of straw.

"Courage!" uttered Goldspur, cautiously hobbling across the room and seating himself beside the stricken man. "You need all your strength and resolution right now, Major!"

"Don't I know it? But this accursed weakness—Tell me all, man—can't you?"

Querulous as was that strain, it betrayed returning strength, and Goldspur at once complied with the request.

Beginning with his advent in Tiptop in the role of Hercules Redrock, the detective narrated all that followed, consuming considerable time in the recital.

Major Duncan proved a patient listener. Not once did he interrupt the detective, save to ask an occasional important question.

With the close of the narrative, silence fell between the two. It was broken, after some minutes, by the veteran, who asked:

"But that Denver letter, stating that the child yet lived, and was held by this Black, or Brown?—who wrote that, you think?"

"Black himself."

"But he had fled when we reached Denver."

"Nevertheless, it was Black's work—though inspired by just what motive, I am not prepared to state. Probably, through a desire for gain."

"I don't hardly accept your theory, Goldspur. He had been silent for years, while his secret was worth thousands."

"That is true. But his wife had just died, and Barmillo had made a demand for the girl. These two things urged him to act. He dared not openly disobey Barmillo, so resorted to the letter, and on

leaving Denver arranged matters so that he could be easily traced. Evidently, he desired to place the girl in Barmillo's hands, yet have you near at hand to wrest her away."

"That is at least plausible, Goldspur. Yes, yes! you have probably gotten the truth of the matter."

"It is well to accept it as the truth at present, sir. If there is an error, the future will reveal it."

"Right again."

"Now, about the ransom, Major—"

"Don't talk to me about it, Goldspur!"

The scoundrel must come to my terms, or go empty handed. He shall accept ransom for all or none. That is my decision, and it is final. I am not to be bribed, cajoled or forced into betraying a friend!"

"But your daughter—"

"There it is again! Hang it all! If she's a true Duncan, she'd take just my stand!"

"Be fair, then, and let her decide it."

"Not another word! Not one, Goldspur, or I'll discharge you from this case!"

Smiling grimly at that testy rejoinder, the detective stretched himself on the pallet, and soon fell asleep.

He was awakened by a cold hand pressed firmly to his lips.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GIMPS AT WORK.

Gimps's homely face was a picture of commingled astonishment, indignation and wrath, when he fell back from that tell-tale rent in the curtain over the window of the old cabin.

"Glory ter Jasper! ther perfessor is in it ag'in! Shore, now, he needs a g'ardeen, an' I reckon I'll hev ter app'int myself sech. He's on an etarnal flop f'm ther fryin' pan int' ther fire. Great jugs o' jeeswax! et keeps me hoppin' hot, et does! But—Sh! me boy! Ye talk so much yer head rattles!"

Thus communing with himself, the lad stood staring blankly at the ray of light a moment, then deliberately resumed his position and again peered through the hole.

Voices came from within, but he was unable to distinguish the words. Yet, he remained at the window, eyeing the scene until Captain Brand had ushered the captive detective into the adjoining room.

"Hexit! Ther scene shifts! Now, Joseph Montgomery Gimps, do yer level best. Yer must save ther perfessor, or die wid him!"

Stealing silently along the house, the lad softly tried the door, and found it locked. Then he crouched beneath the window.

There was no hole in the curtain at this window through which he might look; but he found something infinitely more to his liking—a broken pane! With ear placed to this aperture, he was able to hear distinctly all that passed within.

Patiently, he listened until he heard Captain Brand retire and lock the door. He was strongly tempted to speak to Goldspur, but fear that there might be a guard in the room kept him silent.

Then, too, his own safety was at stake. The outlaw chief might, any minute, open the rear door and discover him. With this thought in mind, Gimps retreated among the outbuildings.

"Ther perfessor is safe enough till sun up," he soliloquized, as he stole along in the shadows. "Great gun-boats! how I'd like ter spit thet gimblet-eyed savage on a toad-sticker! W'u'dn't I, tho? Howsomer, ther trick cain't be worked, right now. Not a bit!"

"W'at'll I do? Go back an' tell ther people? Nit! I guess Spanish John w'u'dn't want no better excuse fer doin' a slashin' business with ther thrapples o' them gents than he c'u'd git out of a bit of a ruction, jest now! No, J. Gimps, upon you falls ther duty. You must rescue 'em. But—how?"

"Then, ther gals! Bless me! they must be about, some 'ercs. One-Eyed said

so, an' he c'u'dn't—c'u'dn't tell a lie—oh, no! W'at a kid he is!—ain't he, now, J. G.! Say, he's great! But, betwixt us, I kin play Davy ter his Goliar."

"Ther gals ain't in ther house, thet's shore. I'll look around, while I figger on ther perfessor's case."

With thoughts running thus, one minute chuckling over his discovery, the next groaning at Goldspur's plight, Gimps cautiously made his way among the outbuildings, peering into each, until he came to a stoutly built smoke house.

Here, he found the door locked. A guarded knock elicited no response from within, and for a moment the boy was puzzled.

"Et's a ground-hog case," he muttered. "Et's ther last o' ther coops, an' ther on'y one with a lock. I'll bet a dollar ag'in' Spanish John's game eye thet I got ther turn called, too."

Then, he knelt, placed his mouth near a crevice, and in a penetrating whisper uttered the words:

"Hey, gals! Gals, do ye heer me?"

Again, there was no response. Then:

"Gals, I'm a friend. W'y don't ye answer? Et's ther last call, I tell ye! I cain't sot on my knees an' beller moonlight serenades—don't ye—"

"Who is it?"

Gimps started guiltily at the plaintive tone, and hastily stammered:

"Beg pardon! I'm Gimps—a friend ter beauty in distress, you bet! But, I say, gals, aire ye both thar?"

"Both," the voice replied.

"Thet's good! How're ye fixed?"

"Fixed?"

"Sitiwated—sarcumstanced, ye know?"

"Oh! we're prisoners, of course."

"Glory ter Jasper! Ef—Say, gals, come out o' yer trance!"

"Boy, what do you mean?"

"Tell me ef yer tied, cain't ye?"

"We are not."

"Then stand away, both o' ye. I've got ter bu'st this door."

Both girls retreated to a corner, while Gimps carefully examined the door.

It was formed of solid oak planks, and hung upon heavy strap hinges. It was secured with a hasp, staple and padlock.

Gimps whistled softly, and reflected. Then he cautiously called the girls to the door, and requested the loan of a wire hairpin, which was promptly slipped through a crevice. Deftly shaping this instrument to suit his purpose, the lad began working on the padlock.

Soon, it yielded. The door swung open, and the girls stepped forth.

Just as that juncture a man appeared, creeping stealthily through the gloom, and confronted the trio.

"Boy, what are you doing?" he demanded, sharply.

"Startin' fer a walk, ter see ther sunrise," was the cool reply. "An' you, mister?"

"None of your insolence! Answer me."

Both girls, stifling the cries of alarm that rose to their lips, shrank back in the shadows. It was not so with Gimps. Fairly desperate, he lowered his head and plunged straight at the inquisitive intruder.

The shock carried both man and boy off their feet. There was a sharp gasp of pain, then Gimps slowly rose.

"Glory ter Goshen! Gals, how was thet fer a collision, eh? Clean knocked out, I guess. His head bumped a stun. Lay a-holt, now, an' we'll lock him in ther smoke-house."

Both girls had partially recovered from their fright, and promptly obeyed. In another minute, the senseless form of the unknown was dragged into the little building. Then, Gimps closed the door, placed the hasp over the staple, and snapped the spring padlock.

"Now, gals, ther coast seems clear, an' we must make our hexit f'm this den. Keep mum, obey orders, an' foller me."

So saying, the lad moved quietly away, with the fugitive maidens at his heels, keeping under cover of the buildings as

long as possible, then quickening his pace in crossing the open.

The timber was gained without discovery of the flight, and the trio began to breathe more freely. All felt that the critical moment was past.

Skirting the head of the draw in which the corral was situated, Gimps laid his course as nearly due south as possible, and hurried on until he came to a small creek, when he announced:

"Gals, I got ter leave ye here. Ther perffessor's in limbo back thar, an' I cain't run away an' leave him. 'Twouldn't look right, ye see, bein' es we're pards. Ef—"

"The professor?" interjected Ruby. "Whom do you mean, boy?"

"Ther perffessor, miss, jest es I said. We're pards, ye see."

"But, who is he?"

"A gent under my protection, miss. He's a nice chap, too, but an awful bother. He'd 'a' bin an orphan long ago but fer me. Allers in trouble."

"You're a brave boy, Gimps!"

"I know et, miss. Ye don't tell me no news."

"But conceited!"

"Terrible!"

"It is the detective, Mr. Goldspur, I presume?"

"I haven't his card wid me, miss, or I'd see."

Baffled, Ruby Ranger smiled, and asked:

"What are we to do? Remain here?"

"No. Keep straight up ther crick a mile or so, then hide, an' wait till I come back. Ef ye don't see me before noon, bear off straight southeast, an' ye'll strike Tiptop by night."

"But you'll come, surely?"

"Ef nothin' pervents. Thar'll e fightin' back thar, by an' by, an' I expects ter take a hand."

"Oh, Gimps! You may be hurt!"

"Or killed!" Polly added, in a frightened tone.

The lad inflated his chest, and in a deep voice responded:

"Sech is life, young ladies! We men must die, thet ther wimmen may weep!"

"Go, now, an' on no account leave ther crick till ye see me or know I ain't comin' back. Wish I c'u'd go 'long, but I cain't leave my pard."

"Oh, Gimps! You are a brave boy, and I was mean to say what I did," cried Ruby, impulsively.

"O' course!" and the urchin calmly watched the girls move away.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ATTACK.

Returning to the vicinity of the cabin, Gimps crouched in an obscure spot, and carefully studied the situation.

Goldspur was in deadly danger, he knew, and he chafed at the thought. But how was he to rescue him? The doors of the house were locked, and the windows seemed secure against intrusion.

Then, too, there might be a number of the outlaws inside, ready to pounce upon him the moment he piched a lock or opened a window.

"Oh, perffessor! Ye're ther trial o' my life!" he soliloquized. "Nothin' but trouble, trouble, since I adopted ye!"

Rising, he silently approached the cabin. All was quiet within, and he stealthily tried each of the doors and windows.

As he had foreseen, all were properly secured.

Then he again applied his eye to the hole in the curtain, and carefully scanned the apartment it commanded.

Greatly to his relief, it seemed to be deserted. The lamp stood on a rude table near the centre of the room. A number of rifles hung on the walls, while on a bench in a corner were several revolvers and a box of fixed ammunition.

"A reg'lar arsenal," the lad muttered. Then his keen eyes noticed a key in the lock of the door leading into the adjoining apartment, and he added:

"This is ther room I've got ter enter. Kin I do et?"

He shook his head dejectedly as he noted the heavy bars guarding the window. Dropping down, he took the bit of wire from his pocket, and began working on the back of the rear door.

In a moment, he knew the task was hopeless. The wire was too light for the heavy lock. It bent without throwing back the bolt, and he was compelled to abandon the attempt.

"Land o' Goshen! Et's growin' light in ther East, an' I'm clean disfiggered!" he grunted. "I cain't make et by door nor windy, an' thet chap in ther smoke-house is apt ter set up a yell any minute. Glory ter Jasper! I wish I hed a key! Might es well wish fer wings, tho', then I c'u'd—Cain't I, tho'?"

Briskly moving to the end of the cabin, Gimps examined the wide stone fire place and chimney, while hope again rose in his breast.

In another minute, with the aid of a rail from a pile near by, he had gained the roof. Creeping to the apex, he approached the chimney, and peered down its yawning throat.

The one glance decided him, and he deftly swung himself into the grimy opening. Then—down, down, half-stilled with soot and ashes, until his feet rested on the wide hearth!

Brushing the dust from his eyes, Gimps glanced quickly around the deserted apartment, then appropriated a brace of loaded revolvers, turned the light low, and approached the door leading into the next room.

He started quilitly as the key clicked in the lock; but no challenge followed the sound. Leaving the door ajar, he crossed the room, and bent over the pallet of straw.

Both prisoners were asleep.

Chuckling grimly, the lad laid his hand upon Goldspur's lips. In an instant, the detective was awake.

"Easy, perffessor," warned Gimps. "Don't be skeered. Et's on'y me, an' we've got no time to lose."

"Gimps?"

"Yer hes called et, perffessor."

"They'll murder you, boy! How did you get in?"

"Down ther chimbley. But, say! Wake yer pardner, so he won't yell. I tell ye we got ter skip."

"Don't be alarmed, boy," Major Duncan requested. "I've been awake all along. Closed eyes don't always mean sleep."

"Right ye aire, Nate, ole boy! But keep a stiff upper lip, you chaps, an' I'll hev ye out in a minute by ther clock."

Deftly, then, the urchin used his knife, and in less than the time stated both men were upon their feet free of bonds.

Conducting them into the other room, Gimps pointed out the weapons, and bade them arm themselves. That done the light was extinguished, and the trio unlocked the rear door and departed.

Not a moment too soon was the rescue effected, for the eastern sky was gray with the light of the coming dawn.

In the shadows at the end of the cabin, Duncan halted, and turned to the detective.

"That scoundrel stated that my daughter was here. Can we not find her? To leave her—"

"She's gone, ole boy," Gimps interrupted.

"Gone?"

"Yas. I run her an' ther cobbler's gal out o' here over an hour ago. She's safe now, or ought to be," and the lad quickly told what he had done.

A brief conference followed. Goldspur and the major agreed that it was not safe for the two girls to traverse that outlaw-infested section without an escort, and it was quickly decided that the latter should follow and join the fugitives.

Accordingly, Gimps led the way toward the creek. A few hundred yards in the timber, he pointed out the course to be followed, and explained his instructions to the girls.

"Ye're dead shore ter find 'em, major,

ef ye keep straight up ther crick," he assured.

"All right, my boy. Now, a word about yourself before we part: You're the greatest chunk of pure insolence, fool-hardy, brawny and reckless courage I ever saw in one of your years. Happily, the two latter qualities outweigh the former. I am going to remember you!"

"In yer will?"

"In my will! You have saved my daughter and myself, and the life of this brave man. You—why, bless me, Goldspur! The rascal's gone!"

The detective smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Who is he, Goldspur?"

"His name is Gimps."

"Gimps?"

"Joseph Gimps. A protege of mine. His father was murdered recently, and—"

"The father's name, man?"

"Solomon Gimps."

"Eh—eh? Solomon! By the Lord Harry! He—I say, Goldspur! take good care of that youngster, will you? I want him!"

The detective nodded grimly, but made no reply, and in another minute the men parted—the major following the course indicated by Gimps, while Goldspur glided in the direction taken by the lad.

"This way, pard," Gimps cautiously hailed, a moment later, stepping from behind a tree. "We'll hev ter hustle ef ye want ter see ther 'burners at work, fer et's showin' light a bit."

"That's exactly what I do want to see, if it's possible, little pard."

Silently, the lad started away through the woods. The distant bellowing of cattle could be heard, and, anon, the shouts of men. These sounds grew louder as the pair advanced, and presently Goldspur was able to glimpse the fires in the corral.

Keeping back from the edge of the draw, Gimps led the way into a thicket which had escaped the fire, and in a very few minutes the two were in a position fairly overlooking the branding chute.

For some little time Goldspur studied the scene, noting the men, the cattle, and the methods employed. Then he touched Gimps on the arm, and they silently quit the thicket.

"Little pard, we must look up Pawnee and his men at once. Those fellows will be done and the cattle driven away in a few hours."

"K'rect, perffessor. But we're on ther wrong side o' ther draw. We must git across, don't ye reckon?"

"Yes, at the timber line down yonder."

Quietly, then, the two stole away, and a little later reached the borders of the barren plain. Crossing the draw, they pushed forward at a rapid pace, keeping just within the timber until a mile or more from the corral.

Then, on a rise in the plain, a short distance away, a troop of armed men suddenly appeared.

In the leader, both recognized Pawnee Bill, the deputy. Beside him, strapped snugly on a horse, yet with hands free to point the way, rode the outlaw, Dandy Dave.

Quickly stepping into view, Goldspur waved his hat. The signal seen, the course was changed, and the cavalcade came up at a gallop.

"Ho! Goldspur, it is really you, and alive! And the kid, too!"

"Well, well! we had given you up as captured or dead, and this is indeed a pleasant surprise."

"But you have news, your face tells me, and I shall be glad to hear you, for I distrust the guide we have pressed into service."

So spoke Pawnee as he sprang from the saddle and grasped the detective's hand, and both voice and mien betrayed deep feeling.

"Yes, Bill; we are here, little pard, and I. But there were good grounds for your

fears, for I was again captured, and carried direct to Captain Brand's rendezvous.

"Others were there in captivity, too—the major and the girls, but little pard struck the trail, hung to it, and made a clean delivery.

"The den is near, and we must arrange our force with care and attack at once, for they are moving heaven and earth to clean up the herd and get away.

"No guards are set, I think, and we may move freely, if quietly, and make a clean sweep."

Continuing, Goldspur briefly described the corral and the cabin, and the force of outlaws to be met, and planned the advance.

Then the men dismounted, secured their horses, and looked to their weapons. A few minutes later they moved away in two divisions, and shortly after sunrise a single rifle shot announced the attack.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SHADE OF ESAU BLACK.

During his enforced seclusion the day preceding his flight from Tiptop, Zebulon Peggs succeeded in establishing temporary peace with Mommy. Captain Brand's message had thoroughly frightened the wily cobbler, and his unwonted humility had much to do in conciliating the good woman.

Seated in the cart, just after nightfall, as we have seen, they drove rapidly away from the little town, over a road that had become familiar to the veteran, and in due course reached the clearing surrounding the old ranch house.

The air was heavy with smoke. Off to the west and to the south, flames were greedily sweeping the dead grass from the timber; but the creek, with its dreary stretches of sand, had proved an effectual fire-guard for the gloomy old pile and the woods on the east.

For a moment, the veteran hesitated, as he scanned those distant lines of fire. Then, reflection told him the danger was past, and he got out of the cart and hitched the mule.

"Hyar we arire, Mommy," he announced. "Let me help ye out, now, an' we'll go right up ter ther house."

"Hoh, dear! Peggs, Hi believe hit's the 'a'nted 'ouse!"

"'Ha'nted house!' Bagonets an' bullets! Woman, ye'll drive me mad with yer tom-fool'ry! Ha'nts, indeed! I'm game fer them critters, ye kin bet! So let 'em come. Hurry, now, ole woman—git down."

"'Hold woman' hag'in! Hoh, Poppy Peggs, ye're ha 'ardened creetur.' But, Hi submit—Hi submit!"

Mommy sighed deeply, and with her husband's assistance got out of the cart. Then both loaded themselves with parcels, and approached the house.

Much to the surprise of the veteran, he found the door ajar. He was sure that he had closed it when quitting the house on his preceding visit, and he recalled instructions he had given Ruby to keep it closed.

"Lawd! Et's jest like a gal ter fergit et, tho', fer 'out o' sight is out o' mind,' with all o' them, an' I don't reckon Ruby is ary deception.

"But I hopes no harm hes come ter her, pore critter. Alone an' mighty nigh friendless, she's shore ter be pitied."

In the house, Peggs closed the door and lighted a lantern, then slowly led the way into the west room, and up the stairs.

Not until they had gained the eastern room on the second floor was anything of an alarming nature seen. Then a metallic gleam in a gloomy corner caught the veteran's eye, and a turn of the lantern revealed the old musket barrel.

Peggs recognized the fragment at a glance, and his face paled with sudden terror. A second turn of the lantern, and the rusty bayonet added its moiety of evidence.

"Good Lawd! Thar's bin trouble hyar!" the veteran groaned, dropping his parcels. "H-hold ther lantern, Mommy."

Thoroughly scared, Mrs. Peggs meekly put down her bundles and obeyed. Then the cobbler stepped under the open trap, and called:

"Ruby! Oh, Ruby! I—I s-say—Ruby!"

No answer save a hollow echo came from the empty loft, but in the ears of the frightened pair it sounded like the wail of a dying soul, and Mommy dropped the lantern and grabbed the veteran.

"'Eavens! Hit's 'a'nts, sure henough!" she whimpered.

"Ha'nts! ther—ther—Dangnation, woman! Let me loose, cain't ye? Et's Ruby—Ruby murdered!"

"Hoh, hit's 'a'nts, Hi know; Hoh, Poppy!"

Beside himself with fear and fury, Peggs resolutely tore himself loose. Swinging the lantern over his arm, he awkwardly climbed into the loft.

"Come on," he yelled, holding the lantern so Mommy could see to ascend. "Come up, Missus Peggs, an' be quick about it!"

Thus urged, and spurred on by her fears, the poor woman quickly scrambled up the ladder and into the garret.

"Now, you keep close ter me, but han's off," the veteran advised. "I'm goin' ter investigate. This is whar I brought Ruby. But su'thin' hes happened, an' I'm fearin' ther gal's hurt."

Slowly, then, they searched the loft. It was deserted, but showed signs of recent occupancy. The window in the gable was open, and a branch of the elm could be heard gently chafing the stout log wall.

The search was ended in a moment. Peggs put down the lantern, and mopped his face nervously. He was both puzzled and alarmed.

Mommy, however, was fast recovering from her fright, and she looked at her husband curiously.

"So you brought Ruby 'ere?" she ventured, after some minutes of silence. "To this old ghost-ridden den!"

"I thought et was safe," the veteran protested. "An' I knowed she wasn't safe in Tiptop."

"W'y didn't ye bring me with 'er—yes, han' Polly too?"

"I dassen't."

"Dassen't?"

"'Ther pen'—'Peggs in ther pen,' the veteran reminded.

"Hoh, blow yer bloomin' pen, Zeb Peggs! Hanswer my question!"

"I was afeard' hof ther convict business, Mommy. Didn't I tell ye?"

"Convict! You're wuss nor ha convict, Zebulon Peggs! You brung that pore chille to 'er death, so you did!"

The cobbler sank limply on the improvised couch.

"Don't say thet, Mommy—don't!" he implored, tremulously. "Good God! I'd 'a' died afore I'd 'a' seen a hair o' her purty head teched—so I w'u'd, now!"

"Well, tell me the truth, Poppy."

"Mommy, I cain't! I've told ye all I durst. I brung ther gal hyar, an' left her comfortable. But she's gone. Spanish John or his gang found her, an' carried her off. Thar's bin a terrible tussle."

"Han' Polly?"

Peggs groaned and hung his head. Sitting there, dejected and unhappy, the past years of his life seemed to float before him. Out of this mental review, certain events rose with such vivid distinctness that he shuddered violently. Then his hands clenched, his face flushed, and in his eye appeared a peculiar glow.

In another minute, he had risen, and Mommy started back with a slight cry. The man seemed transfigured.

"I'm glad of et!" he told himself, aloud.

"Glad hof—hof—w'ot, Peggs?"

"Thet I'm an unconvicted convict, woman! I did et, an' I'd do et ag'in. Bagonets—yas! and I'll be revenged."

"Revenged?"

"On Spanish John. He killed my Tom! He stole ther gals! I will slarter him!"

Mommy uttered a faint cry of remonstrance.

"W'y, Zebulon Peggs! You, who 'ave up'eld the law!—you talk hof murder!"

"Drat ther law! I'm done upholdin' of et. I'm gettin' desp'rit, I am, an' ther law kin go ter blazes!"

"Now, Poppy—"

"Don't wheedle, woman! We got no time ter argiement. Hold thet lantern till I bring up ther passels."

The veteran's grim face forbade protest or plea, and she silently picked up the lantern and held it beside the hatchway while he descended and tossed up the packages.

Then Peggs took the light, and left the house, to secret the cart and the mule in a draw near the clearing.

The veteran was absent some little time. On his return, the window in the gable was closed, and both crouched down in moody silence to await the coming of day.

The lantern, hanging on a nail in a rafter, shed a pale and dismal light over the old attic.

Thus, an hour passed. Then a peculiar sound started the pair—a long-drawn, mournful cry, which rang weirdly through the old house.

Mommy shivered, and grew pale. Convulsively, she grasped the veteran's arm.

"Sh!" warned Peggs, himself trembling. "Don't speak!"

Again came the cry, now accompanied with stealthy steps.

"'Eaven save us!" whimpered Mommy. "We're 'a'nted!"

Ere the veteran could speak, a ghastly face rose slowly through the open trap, and the staring eyes gleamed balefully at the pair.

For a full minute that terrible visage remained, then suddenly vanished.

Peggs shuddered, and attempted to rise; but his strength failed him, and he sank limply on the couch, moaning:

"Good Lawd! I'm lost! 'Twas ther shade of Esau Black!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BELMONT APPEARS.

Utterly cowed by that momentary glimpse of the apparition, both the cobbler and his wife hid their heads under a blanket, and shivered with dread.

How long they remained thus, neither could have told. Before either had plucked up courage to peer forth, a firm step sounded in the room beneath them, and they heard some one ascending the ladder.

This brought Peggs to his senses. He cautiously put down the blanket, and watched the hatchway.

Then the head and shoulders of a man appeared. At sight of the cobbler, the intruder started and exclaimed:

"Hallo! hallo! Is it you, Peggs?"

"Ye know et, Rupert Belmont. But you stay right thar. I aint no ways glad ter see ye!"

"I suppose not. However, I am glad to see you!"

And the rancher deftly swung himself into the loft.

"The fact is, Spanish John and I have parted company, and, now that you are here, I desire to talk with you," he resumed, advancing, despite the rusty pistol the veteran flourished. "Just put that thing up, will you? I shall not harm you."

"Ah, Mrs. Peggs, too! Indeed, madame, I beg your pardon."

Mommy had ust put down that portion of the blanket hiding her face. She nodded stiffly in response to the rancher's words, but said nothing.

"Peggs, you and I must be friends," Belmont continued. "I have never harmed you."

"Same ole story, Rupert. But et don't go! Thar's thet matter o' Tom's death ag'in ye."

"I had no hand in that crime, Peggs."

"But ye swore Spanish John clear."

"I swore to the truth, as I believed. Tom was the agressor. Since then, I have learned that he was the victim of a

cunning plot. The night before the tragedy, Barford got Dandy Dave to draw the loads from your boy's weapon, and substitute blank cartridges. The next morning he provoked Tom into attacking him, and killed him."

"Kin ye prove that, Rupert Belmont?"

"I can, and will."

"That sounds better! But yer change o' heart comes at a late day. W'at's troublin' ye?"

"Spanish John has attempted to murder me. I want revenge."

"Do tell! 'An' thet brung ye hyar?"

"Indirectly, yes. Let me explain."

Seating himself on the attic floor, the rancher tersely outlined the plot against Ruby Ranger.

The cobbler and his wife listened attentively.

"Love of money lured me into the disgraceful affair," Belmont concluded. "The mysterious death of John Brown determined me to quit the matter; but I was in the grasp of a merciless monster; my own life was in danger, I knew, and I found it extremely difficult to release myself."

"However, Barford finally consented to my departure, under certain conditions and restrictions, and I at once started for Guthrie."

"A few miles from Tiptop I was ambushed, dragged into a ravine, and left for dead."

"When I came to, I found that my horse, money, valuables and weapons had all been taken, and I was at a loss what to do."

"Then it occurred to me to come here and spend the night, and, in the morning, go to my sister's, where I could procure another outfit and go my way, leaving Barford to believe, for the present, that his tools had succeeded."

"That, Peggs, is my story, and again I tell you we must become friends."

"You may see for yourself that I have had a close call for my life."

The rancher removed his hat, revealing an ugly-looking scalp wound.

The veteran nodded.

"I'll take yer word, Rupert Belmont," he said, slowly. "An' I hope, fer your sake, et'll pan our straight. Now, about yer plans, Belmont?"

"What would you suggest?"

"Ef ye aire in airnest, ye must help find ther gals."

"Gladly."

"Whar aire they?"

"Frankly, I don't know. Both escaped from this house last night, seized two horses, and fled. Barford's men went in pursuit at daybreak."

"Both gals war hyar, ye say?"

"Yes. Your daughter was seized last night in Tiptop, as Miss Ranger. The mistake was not discovered until she was brought here, where, by some means, Miss Ranger had preceded her. Then, before either could be properly secured, the men were attacked by a madman, and during the struggle the girls escaped."

"Neither was hurt?"

"No."

The cobbler drew a long breath of relief.

"They'll make their way back ter Tiptop," he muttered.

"My friend, I fear they have been recaptured."

"But they've not bin brought hyar."

"No, they were to be taken to Barford's secret stronghold. It was deemed unwise to risk this cage a second time."

"Ye know whar ther stronghold is?"

"I do. It is a number of miles from here."

"Go thar, then, an' see ef they hev ther gals. Ef so, we'll plot ter rescue 'em. Ye're game ter try et, I reckon?"

"If I had a horse—"

"My mule is hyar. Take et."

The rancher agreed, and soon rose to depart.

Then Mommy spoke:

"Habout the madman you mentioned, Mr. Belmont—did 'e hescape?"

"He did, madame, and is at large. I heard him in the woods near here to-night."

"Hoh, dear! Han' is this the 'a'nted 'oun?"

"It is said to be haunted—yes. But the 'ha'nts' are mostly flesh and blood of the outlaw stripe, I believe."

"Hoh, no, Mr. Belmont! There's real a'nts 'ere. Hi know, for Poppy—"

"Keep still, cain't ye!" snarled Peggs.

"Cluck—cluck—chick!—wuss'n a clock's penjulum! Belmont, excuse 'er! Et's wearin' on one, I know. Vum! I was never deflected so in ther time o' Melindy an' Georg'ana—never!"

"But, Poppy, you did see hit, han' reckernized hit, too!" triumphantly.

The veteran flushed and scowled darkly.

"You really saw something?" Belmont inquired.

"Yes, a man."

"Ha spook, Poppy!"

"Peggs, perhaps it was the madman."

"Hexactly w'at I desisted on ter Missus Peggs," the veteran assured.

"Hoh, you willain! Hi—"

"Be silent, both of you!" interrupted Belmont, sternly. "It is no time for a dispute."

"Peggs, you are sure it was the madman you saw?"

"I reckon. I heard him howlin', an' he putt his head through the trap thar. I said he was crazy, then."

"Hoh—"

"Madame, be quiet, please. You are in danger here, both of you. The maniac is more to be feared than a regiment of spooks."

Both the cobbler and his wife grew pale at the rancher's tone, and both regarded him anxiously.

"Yes, you are in danger here," Belmont proceeded, after a moment's reflection. "You must hide till daylight. There is a capital place here. I will show it to you."

Approaching the nearer of the low side walls, the rancher passed his hand over the rough surface until he detected a cavity, into which he thrust his fingers. Then came a sharp wrench, and a door, hinged at the bottom, slowly opened, disclosing a dark recess.

"This is a false wall, running the length of the building," he explained. "It was formed of slabs, and chinked to keep out light and dust. I believe it was used by the occupants of this house as a sort of secret store room. At any rate you will be quite safe in there."

The cobbler and his wife gazed at the opening with no little surprise. Then Mommy gathered up the blankets and entered the closet.

"Come hon, Poppy," she invited.

But Peggs rebelled.

"Bagonets! I kin take keer o' myself," he informed. "Jest shut ther door, Belmont. Let ther woman stay in ther. She'll be out o' my way in case of a scrimmage."

Mommy assented, and the rancher swung the heavy door into place. Then Peggs told him how to proceed to find the mule, and he departed.

The hours of darkness passed without further interruption. Shortly after sunrise some one entered the room below, and a moment later the features of Esau Black again appeared above the hatchway.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE FLIGHT.

Shortly before sunrise Captain Brand briefly consulted Noolan at the corral, then proceeded to the cabin.

The daring outlaw was in a jubilant mood.

Affairs at the corral had progressed splendidly, under the brilliant light of numerous fires and lanterns, and he believed that the entire herd would be rebranded and driven off in small bunches some hours before the pursuers could come up, which would virtually insure

safety and a profit of several thousand dollars to the band.

Then, too, Major Duncan and daughter were in his clutch, and they would yield a heavy ransom.

Captain Brand softly rubbed his slender yellow hands while dwelling on the flattering prospect, and a covetous gleam crept into his single eye.

"'Twill be all mine, too!" he told himself. "These rascals—Faugh! They are dullards!"

Then he unlocked the door and entered the house.

Just across the threshold he paused and glanced around suspiciously.

"I left that lamp burning," he muttered. "What extinguished it?"

Leaving the door open, he quickly raised the curtains at the windows and again looked around the room.

The stone hearth was covered with soot and ashes, and across the floor ran a grimy trail, ending at the door of the apartment in which the captives had been confined.

With a cry of rage on his lips, the outlaw chief drew a weapon and quickly crossed the threshold.

A single glance was sufficient—Goldspur and Duncan were gone!

Straight to the pallet of straw ran that sooty trail, and on the floor were a number of severed thongs.

Fairly dazed by this unexpected stroke, Captain Brand turned and strode out of the house. In another minute he had reached the outbuilding in which the girls had been locked.

"I at least have them yet," he thought, as he noticed the lock. "Yes, and the daughters shall unloose the old man's purse strings!"

No sooner had the door opened, however, than a cry of dismay burst from his thin lips.

The maidens, too, had vanished.

In their stead a man confronted him. And that man was Rupert Belmont!

For a full minute surprise and rage struggled for the mastery in Captain Brand. He seemed, just then, incapable of further speech and stared blankly at the smiling prisoner.

"Well, Barford, you appear somewhat astonished," the rancher coolly observed. "How is it? Whom were you expecting to see?"

"Oh! Oh! It is you, then, Rupert Belmont?"

"Assuredly!"

"But—but you were far away, I thought."

"Or dead, Barford?"

"Dead, if you prefer. But, explain your presence here."

"You should do that!"

"Come, Belmont—don't cross me. There is a mystery back of this. You must explain it."

"Briefly, then, I was ambushed, wounded, and robbed after leaving Tiptop. As soon as possible, I came here, where I was again set upon and knocked senseless. When I came to I found myself locked up in here."

"But who did it, man? Surely—"

"We were in the dark, and the attack was very sudden."

"Well, no matter. The girls were locked in here. I fancied you, perhaps, had liberated them."

"A wild fancy, decidedly. But I am glad to see you, Barford. I am pleased to be released."

"But you are not to be released, Rupert Belmont," Captain Brand declared in a sinister tone. "At least, not now."

"Why not, may I ask?"

"You are dangerous. A single treacherous move just now would ruin us. And you are not to be trusted."

"Indeed! I am to understand, then, that both assaults upon me were instigated by you?"

"If it please you—yes!"

A dark look crossed Belmont's face, and he seemed about to spring upon the outlaw, but was promptly checked by Captain Brand's pistol-armed hand.

Then the desperado, retreating a step, quickly closed and locked the door, and the rancher was again a prisoner.

For a moment Captain Brand stood undecided.

"Curse it! Is ill luck never to cease!" he grumbled, glancing at the risen sun. "It is the day again and everything in a snarl!"

"Could Belmont have released the captives? Could he have had himself locked in to disarm suspicion? Were I sure—"

The crack of a rifle down by the corral checked that half-audible strain. Captain Brand started violently. What was amiss?

Before he could stir, a defiant yell rang out. It was quickly followed by a furious exchange of shots, and then the brand-burners came stumbling out of the draw, retreating toward the cabin.

Captain Brand realized it all clearly enough, then! The marshals, discovering his lair, had stolen a march on him, and ruin was at hand!

A frenzied yell burst from his throat, and he dashed aside the cowl-like mask. Further concealment of his identity was useless, he knew, and in another minute he was in the midst of his followers, urging them to make a stand.

The men rallied under his goading voice, and sought such shelter as was at hand; but they knew, and the gambler knew, that the day was lost. The attacking party had moved up in two divisions, and now held both banks of the draw.

"Quick, Noolan! Take two of the boys and get out the horses; while we hold the hounds at bay," ordered Spanish John sharply.

"Pallas, fire the house! There are secrets there they must never learn!"

The men addressed sprang quickly to the tasks assigned to them, while the gambler and the remaining outlaws, crouching out of range, kept up a hot fire on the deputies moving through the timber.

A few minutes thus, then, just as a burst of flame came from the doomed cabin, a shrill signal announced that the horses were ready, and the brand-burners made a dash for the stables.

Noolan and his aids had done their work well. Not only were the horses bridled and saddled for flight, but tiny tongues of flame were shooting up here and there in the long hay shed!

Then came the order to mount, and in another minute the survivors—six in all—spurred away through the timber, followed by a volley from the deputies.

Spanish John was in the lead, with Pallas close beside him. Both saw that there was yet a gap in the attacking line on the west, and through that gap they swept.

A sharp command rang through the timber, and a leaden hail whistled around the fleeing desperadoes. Just ahead was a knoll; beyond it lay safety, and roweling spurs sank deep in the flanks of the frightened horses.

The crest of the rise was gained with ranks unbroken. Then, when another bound meant security, the gambler's horse quivered and sank, with a ball through the head.

Spanish John landed on his feet. At the same instant Pallas uttered a shout of agony and fell from his horse. A flying leap carried the gambler alongside the riderless steed, and in another breath he was again in the saddle, heading the column!

A wild cheer from the reckless spirits greeted that dexterous feat. Then all swept down the hill and out into a valley, where a brief halt was made.

"Pards, we must disband for the present, and scatter," Spanish John announced. "A month from to-day, we'll all meet at the old ranch and divide the booty."

"No, to-day!" four voices cried, as one, and each of the desperadoes leveled a weapon at the chief.

The beady black eye of the gambler glittered wickedly, and his slim yellow

hands crept stealthily to the butts of the weapons in his holsters.

"Stiddy, chief! Don't try that!" Noolan warned. "I hates ter lift hand ag'in' ye, but we've sworn ter hev fair play, an' fair play et shall be!"

"Go with us quietly, an' divide fairly, an' ye're still our chief, through thick an' thin."

"Refuse, an' ye'll eat cold lead, right hyar!"

"Do I speak et straight, pards?"

"Ye bet!" came the answer in chorus. Spanish John laughed harshly.

"So be it, then!" he exclaimed. "But I warn you, men, that you are building your own ruin, for the delay will give time for pursuit."

"But forward, now! We must strike the bad lands to cover our trail, and there is not a moment to lose."

With suspicions lulled by that ready acquiescence, the outlaws obeyed, and for upward of an hour the five men held on due west.

About the middle of the forenoon, they rode out upon a bold ridge, where, in response to a gesture from the gambler, all silently drew rein.

In the valley below them was a man, and all saw that he was none other than their escaped captive, Major Duncan!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

GOLDSBUR'S DISCOVERY.

In forming for the attack on the corral, Detective Goldspur, with Gimps, Jack Rabbit, and five men had crept through the tall grass in the draw and entered the timber south of the enclosure, while Pawnee Bill with Lightfoot and the remaining members of the posse stole into position on the opposite side.

After some minutes, an exchange of signals announced that all was in readiness, and then the deputy marshal stepped boldly into view, at a point directly above the northern line of the corral, and hailed the nearest of the brand-burners.

It chanced that the man was Noolan. He looked up with a start, and an oath came from his lips as he recognized the deputy.

"Surrender!" shouted Pawnee, sharply. "You are hemmed in, and cannot escape!"

A rifle shot was the answer, and the leaden ball passed within an inch of the deputy's ear.

Down he dropped and from both sides of the draw a deadly fire was poured into the corral, driving the brand-burners, in utter confusion, through the upper gate, and a moment later out of the draw.

Then Spanish John appeared, checked the headlong flight, as we have seen, and held the advancing lines at bay until Noolan signaled that the horses were ready.

Quick to detect this move of the outlaws, both Goldspur and Pawnee urged their men forward, hoping to cut off escape. But the distance intervening was too great, and Spanish John and his followers succeeded in slipping through the lines.

Detailing two men to push on to the top of the knoll and watch the movements of the fleeing outlaws until the horses could be brought up, the deputy turned to the burning cabin.

That the building was doomed was evident. The eastern room was burning fiercely, but the flames had not yet eaten through the partition, and it was quickly decided to enter and search the intact apartment.

Accordingly a rail was procured from a pile near by, and the sash and bars of a window were quickly battered in, giving egress to a number of the men.

As a result of the hasty search that followed, a square tin box filled with correspondence, was brought to light, and a mere glance at the contents of a few of the letters convinced both officers that the find was a most important one.

Scarcely had this discovery been made when two of the men approached, leading a prisoner.

"Hallo! It's Belmont!" Goldspur exclaimed. "We're not altogether out of luck, after all, Pawnee!"

"You will be if you tarry here," the rancher retorted, with a frown. "If you intend to round up Spanish John, you must move quickly."

"Indeed!"

"Keep your sneers, sir! I do not seek to curry favor with you, but to avenge myself upon one I hate."

"I came here to trip the gambler, but was myself captured. Knowing his plans as I do and his secret haunts, I tell you to go to the old ranch house south of here if you would take him."

"Is that the truth, Belmont?"

"It is the truth, Detective Goldspur!"

"I broke with him because of his crimes, abandoned my property, and started away, but was way-laid, assaulted, and robbed by his agents."

"Then I went to the old ranch house to pass the night, and met there Cobbler Peggs and his wife. With them I planned to rescue the girls, and came here for that purpose, but was forestalled by the boy Gimps, who, believing me an enemy, knocked me senseless and dragged me into the prison in which the girls had been kept."

"There I was found by Spanish John. Holding me in his power, he confessed to the assault and robbery, and I mentally swore vengeance against him."

"As your prisoner, my hands are tied, yet will I work him all harm possible."

Bitter was the voice of the rancher; but his words rang with truth and were believed.

"The fellow is no longer of importance to us," Goldspur declared. "Even the evidence he can give us may readily be spared should he violate his promise and steal away."

Pawnee assented to this view, and Belmont, much to his surprise, was released.

Shortly thereafter, the dead—two outlaws killed in the corral fight—were buried. Then the horses were brought up and preparations for pursuit were hastily made.

The two men stationed on the crest of the knoll to watch the retreat of the brand-burners came in and reported the outlaws in full flight some miles away and heading westward.

This report led to a division of the force. Pawnee and his posse decided to follow Spanish John's trail, while Goldspur, with Lightfoot, Gimps, Jack Rabbit, and the prisoner, Denver Red, with three wounded brand-burners, were to push on to the old ranch house and there entrap Spanish John, picking up the fugitives, Major Duncan and the two girls, on the way.

With the adoption of this plan, Pawnee and his posse, accompanied by Belmont, mounted and rode away across the knoll, while Goldspur's party, guided by Gimps, proceeded to the spot where the lad left the two girls some hours earlier, and thence up the stream.

No trace of the fugitive maidens was discovered, but Gimps was positive they had obeyed his instructions and gone south along the creek.

Several miles had been covered, and the sun was nearing the meridian, when in a bit of broken ground bordered with huge boulders and thickets of haw bushes Goldspur suddenly halted the little cavalcade and dismounted.

The grassy earth just ahead was trampled and scarred, and as the keen eye of the detective noted these signs he looked up, saying:

"There has been a struggle here."

"Come, Lightfoot. See what you can make out of it."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SURPRISE.

Upon leaving Gimps, the fugitive maidens had stolen through the darkness in utter silence, and with no small degree of trepidation.

They had proceeded nearly a mile when the path dipped into the deep shadows of

a bluff. Fearful of the intense gloom, Ruby paused with the whispered query: "Shall we go on?"

"No; we would better wait here for the present. Let us get off the path, though."

Together, then, they crept toward the foot of the bluff.

Not a dozen paces had they taken when a trampling sound just ahead caused them to halt in alarm and dismay.

Then, before either could stir, a white shape rose out of the gloom, and quickly advanced toward them.

"It's a horse," exclaimed Ruby.

"No—a mule," Polly quickly amended, with a chirp of surprise and delight.

"And it's Poppy's 'critter' at that!" True enough, it was the animal Zebulon Peggs had loaned Belmont. Hitched by the rancher in the vicinity of the outlaw rendezvous, it had broken loose, and was now wandering aimlessly.

Neither of the girls, however, was aware of the facts, and they were puzzled to account for the presence of the beast.

"Poppy is somewhere near," Polly decided, at length. "He has been searching for us."

"That is it, I suspect," Ruby agreed. "But what shall we do? Await Gimps?"

"Certainly, unless we find that our escape has been discovered. In that event, we'll make Sancho carry us away; that is, if you can ride bareback."

Ruby Ranger assented to this proposition, and both sat down to await developments.

Presently the east began to flush with light, and a new day was slowly ushered in. By the gray light of the dawn the fugitives anxiously watched the visible portions of the path they had traversed.

For some minutes nothing to excite alarm was seen or heard. Then a hail rang out some distance away, and both sprang to their feet.

That the voice was not that of Gimps both knew, for it was full, strong, and resonant.

A moment the fugitives waited, then again came the hail, even more distinctly: "Ruby! Ruby Ranger!"

The girls shivered with apprehension. The same thought was in the mind of each: the escape had been discovered and that cry came from one of the outlaws searching the timber.

"Sh!" warned Polly. "They are attempting to decoy us into revealing ourselves."

"We must go before we are seen."

In another minute both maidens had mounted Sancho. Riding out from the shelter of the bluff, Polly urged the animal into the narrow path, and the flight was resumed.

In silence they rode down the hill. At the foot of the slope Polly attempted to turn from the path, but Sancho obstinately refused to obey her sharp tug on the rein.

Instead he took the bit in his teeth and quickened his pace.

Again and again Polly tried to turn him aside, until compelled to give up in despair.

"Perhaps your father is somewhere ahead," Ruby suggested at length. "Brute instinct may be better than human reason just now. Give him his head."

Polly uttered a vexed sigh.

"Glad you mentioned it," she retorted. "Go it, Sancho!"

The mule ambled slowly across the wide depression and ascended a long, broken slope covered with heavy thickets and strewn with huge boulders.

In the woodland above another halt was made.

"We won't run any further till we know what we are running from," Polly declared in a decided tone. "What if Gimps, finding it impossible to return, has sent some one in his stead?"

"That is true, Polly. We may have been running from a friend."

"Exactly."

With that both girls again became silent, and patiently awaited the appear-

ance of the lone trailer on the opposite slope.

His coming was not long delayed, and he was yet alone.

Crossing the elevation, he descended the slope, and started across the little valley with long, swinging strides.

The fugitives watched him with the deepest interest.

Was he friend or foe?

Suddenly Polly touched Ruby on the arm and pointed away in another direction.

There, sheltered by a ridge in the plain and racing along at break-neck speed, were five horsemen.

The course they were on would lead them directly past the two girls, and both sprang to their feet in alarm.

Then, in the foremost of the riders, they recognized Spanish John, and their faces blanched with fear.

"The man yonder is a decoy," uttered Ruby in a suppressed tone. ("We have not a minute to lose!")

They had proceeded nearly a mile when a single rifle shot rang out far behind them. It was followed by a shrill yell.

Involuntarily Polly shuddered and drew rein.

"I'm afraid the trailer was a friend after all," she exclaimed. "I wish we had taken some measure to warn him!"

"It is useless to talk about it now. Let's go on," urged Ruby, coldly.

Silently inclining her head, Polly started Sancho onward, and for an hour neither spoke.

Then suddenly the animal turned out of the path, plunged briskly into a hidden draw, and stopped.

Before them was the cobbler's cart, and at sight of the homely vehicle a cry of amazement burst from Polly Peggs.

"Poppy is somewhere near—depend on that," she exclaimed.

Ruby quickly looked around, then pointed to an opening in the surrounding tangle of bushes, saying:

"Look through there! See—it is the old ranch house!"

Polly obeyed and an affirmation came from her lips.

Dismounting, the two girls tied Sancho to a tree, then climbed into the cart. Neither just then had the courage to approach the gloomy old house, the scene of such recent perils.

Then a number of men rushed swiftly into the draw and both sprang up with cries of dismay!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE MAJOR'S PROPOSITION.

A flash of exultation crossed Spanish John's yellow face when he recognized in the man in the valley his late captive and enemy, Major Nathan Duncan.

A single gesture brought his well-trained followers to a silent stand; another sent them scurrying out of sight behind the ridge.

"Steady, lads—all!" the gambler warned, when a safe distance beyond the summit. "Easy, now, and listen, and we'll turn bitter defeat into sweet victory."

"Yon man, as you all know, is Major Duncan, and his presence here, alone, is not without significance."

"Look to your lariats, then, lads, and follow me."

"If I mistake not, the trail leads into yonder timber, and there we may surely find a covert from which to rope our prey."

"Now—silence, all, and ride like the wind."

A thrust of his spurs sent his horse into the lead, then in single file the outlaws swept rapidly along behind the ridge, heading for the timber clump in which the two girls were concealed.

Recognizing the gambler, the latter mounted and fled, as we have seen, yet not so quickly as to elude the vigilant eyes of Spanish John and his men.

In the timber the chief rode behind a thicket and dismounted. Leaving one man in charge of the horses, he at once started down the slope with the others, stealing

along under cover of rock and bush, and in a moment the ambush was formed.

Wholly unsuspecting of that cunning trap, Major Duncan came boldly up the slope. Just as he reached the centre of the little rock-girt open, a faint signal rang out, and the coils of three lariats whirled through the air.

Thus apprised of his danger at the last moment, Duncan dodged and flung up his rifle barrel, warding off two of the nooses, but the third sped true and settled snugly around his shoulders.

A jerk on the lariat brought the gamey struggling man to the ground, where he was quickly disarmed and bound.

Then Spanish John spoke:

"Well, Nate, old boy, you didn't travel far this heat!" he jeered. "Foxy you are! I declare, your departure this morning was fully as great a surprise to me as this meeting is to you!"

"And your charming daughter—she ran away, too—the minx! Do you know anything of her whereabouts?"

White with disappointment and anger, Major Duncan twined his blazing eyes upon his merciless foe, and surveyed him with silent scorn.

"Won't speak, eh, dear brother? Grief and anxiety too deep for words, I suppose?"

"Now, Nate, old boy—business!" Spanish John continued after a moment's pause. "Forty thousand buys you clear!"

"Forty thousand! A large sum of money; but listen to me. I have a proposition to make:

"Permit me to go my way unmolested with my daughter, and I will pay you, three days from now in the city of Guthrie, thirty thousand dollars."

"I said forty, Nate!"

"Well, forty thousand, then!"

Keenly the gambler's glittering black optic scanned Duncan's face, then asked:

"Can I trust you, Nate?"

"You have my word."

"It is enough! I will meet you in Guthrie three days hence."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

At that juncture, Noolan glanced inquiringly at his companions. Both nodded sharply, and he stepped forward.

"Beg yer pardon, gents, but that leetle game is no go," he curtly informed.

Uttering an oath, Spanish John leaped to his feet.

"Curse you! What do you mean?" he grated.

"Jest what I say. Ther deal ye've made is off. We don't trust ye ter go alone."

"Ye bet we doesn't!"

"We all goes or none!"

The gambler scowled darkly; but three revolvers covered his heart, and he realized that he was helpless.

"Very well, then," he returned. "But what do you propose, pard?"

"Thet we capter ther gal, an' hold both her an' her dad till ther ransom is paid. Then we want an equal divvy."

"All right, Noolan; but have a care that you do not spoil the game!"

"You understand, Nate? These gents object to the course you proposed, and the plan will have to be amended."

Major Duncan made no reply, but wearily turned his head.

Mentally cursing himself for not sending the trio safely out of earshot ere coming to terms with Duncan, Spanish John issued his orders, and in a few minutes the men were again in the saddle, Noolan with the captive behind him.

Of the ride that followed, nothing need be said, save that it was accomplished in silence. Arrived in the vicinity of the old ranch house, the entire party dismounted. Then a man was detailed to remain with the horses and the captive, while the others, headed by the gambler, searched for the girls.

The hunt was brief. Guided by girlish voices, the outlaws stealthily approached the hidden draw. Then a glance through the undergrowth discovered the fugitives, and the four men leaped swiftly forward.

Resistance or attempted escape was worse than useless, and before either of

the maidens could comprehend just what had happened, both were again captives! "To the old house with them," ordered Spanish John, jubilantly.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ESAU BLACK SPEAKS.

At sight of that grim visage hovering above the hatchway in the old attic, Zebulon Peggs uttered a shrill howl of terror and retreated precipitately to the door in the false wall.

"Fer ther love o' heaven, Mommy, let me in!" he moaned, pounding nervously on the rough slabs. "Et's hyar ag'in!"

"Be silent, fool! I am mortal, can you not see?" and with the words the intruder boldly swung himself into the loft and confronted the cobbler.

"Go away!" yelled Peggs, retreating step by step.

"Ye're dead, an' ye know ye aire! They buried ye in Tiptop—so they did!"

"Bosh, I tell you—you superstitious fool! I'm not dead, nor do I want to be, so put down that pistol."

"No, I won't!" he retorted. "Ye keep off, too! Bagonets an' bullets! Thar's no reason ye sh'ud harm me, Esau Black, an' I don't want ter associate with ye, nohow!"

"Esau Black! You know me, then?"

"Ter be shore!"

"Well, you see that I'm mortal."

"Never said ye wasn't, Esau Black! Ye might 'a' know'd ye cu'dn't do no ghost business with me! Bagonets! What ye take me fer—a kid?"

"A scoundrel, Zeb Peggs—a cunning scoundrel!"

"Ye're another!"

"Granted! But, come, Peggs—we shouldn't quarrel. I want you to help me, and our fortunes are made."

"I'm done with birds o' your feather, Esau Black!"

Black's grim visage contracted in a dark frown and he swore softly. After a moment's reflection he fixed his gaze on the cobbler and asked:

"How about that old Denver job? you—"

"'Sh!" interrupted Peggs, with a violent tremor in his upraised hand. "Fer ther love o' marcy, don't—"

"That will fix you!" viciously.

A groan was the only response.

"Mind you, Peggs, I care nothing about the matter personally. But it hangs over your head, and I am determined that you shall not betray me."

"All that I shall require of you may be very briefly stated. First, absolute silence concerning the past, with your assistance in finding and regaining possession of Ruby Ranger. After that you are to take your family and quit the United States forever. Go to Canada, Mexico, or Cuba—I care not where, so that it is beyond the confines of this country."

"In return, I shall keep your secret, and pay you the sum I have named."

"There you have the matter in a nutshell, Zebulon Peggs, and I demand an answer."

The cobbler shook his head dejectedly and drew a long breath.

"I cain't answer jest yet, Esau Black. Give me a short time."

"Granted, on condition you don't attempt to leave this house."

"I shan't go till Belmont comes back. No, I'll not try ter escape. Ye kin 'pend on thet."

"All right, Zeb; take your time."

With that Esau Black arose and went below. For some little time the cobbler remained in a crouching attitude, with face buried in hands, then got up and began walking slowly to and fro.

Unheard by either man, the door in the false wall above had opened. Mommy had overheard the conversation in the loft, and, with the departure of Black and the cobbler, crept from the long and narrow recess to a position beside the hatchway, where she could hear all that was said in the room below.

What was the secret that gave Esau Black such power over her husband?

Determined to know, she finally slipped through the hatchway and started down the ladder.

When half-way down, there was an ominous cracking. Then, suddenly, the uprights pulled loose from the logs, and ladder and woman fell with a crash.

Fortunately for Mommy, the distance was short, and she sustained no injury, beyond a severe shaking up. But the uprights, old and rotten, were badly broken, and the ladder was a thing of the past.

Alarmed by the crash, Peggs wheeled quickly. A glance discovered the cause of the disturbance, and he started toward Mommy.

But Mrs. Peggs, fearful of his added weight on the quivering floor, warned him back and hastily scrambled to her feet.

Then, for a full minute husband and wife looked fixedly at each other. The cobbler was the first to speak.

"Wal, Missus Peggs, I am glad ter see ye so far rekiwered f'm yer scare o' ghosts as ter venture out," he remarked, sarcastically. "Or, did they run ye out?"

Mommy sighed mournfully and replied: "Hoh, Zebulon, let us 'ave peace! Let us not quarrel."

"You're in trouble. Hi know, dear 'art, han' Hi want to 'elp you."

"That Hesau Black 'olds ha secret hon you—"

"He does, Missus Peggs—yas! But don't you meddle. You let Esau alone. Jes' mind what I told ye, an' keep a-sayin', 'Ther pen'—'Peggs in ther pen', will ye?"

"But fer w'ot, Poppy?"

"Ter git used ter ther idea, Missus Peggs."

"You don't mean—"

"Clucketty—cluck—cluck! Good Lawd! I do mean et, an' I wish I was thar now!"

"Hoh, Poppy! The pen?"

"Yes, Missus, ther pen! I'm goin' thar. My min's made up. I shell defy Esau, an' that means thet I shell go t' ther pen."

Uttering a cry of grief and terror, poor Mommy reeled blindly toward the veteran.

It was slightly past midday when Esau Black re-entered the old ranch house. He was terribly excited, and his bruised face wore a peculiar look—a look betraying a strange admixture of fear and triumph.

Ascending the stairs, he hurriedly made his way to the east room, where he found the cobbler and his wife seated on an old bench they had dragged in from the adjoining apartment.

"Up with you, Peggs!" he ordered, sharply. "Spanish John and his men are coming, and 'twill never do for them to catch us here. They have both girls and the major—"

"Perdition! The ladder is down!"

"Yes, ther ladder is down," calmly assented Peggs.

"What can we do? We cannot escape, we cannot hide! We are caught like rats in a trap!"

But at that juncture a heavy trampling sounded through the house. Then a number of persons were heard ascending the stairs. In the adjoining apartment the footsteps ceased. A door was noisily closed and barred, and for a moment all was silent.

CHAPTER XL.

THE MAJOR'S DAUGHTER.

The cobbler and his wife had both risen from the bench, while Esau Black, fairly quivering with fear, crept into the nearest corner.

No one of the trio uttered a sound, but all gazed steadily at the door, expecting Spanish John to appear.

And in the adjoining apartment a somewhat similar scene was presented, for three persons were there, all standing silent and motionless. With hands pinioned at his back, leaning weakly against the partition wall was Major Duncan. Opposite to him, and both secured in a like manner, were the two girls, Ruby and Polly.

A moment thus, then he stepped forward and abruptly asked:

"Which of you girls is Ruby Ranger?"

A slight sound in the adjoining apartment arrested the answer. That query had reached the ears of Esau Black. A peculiar look crossed the rascal's face, and he advanced quickly but noiselessly to the cobbler's side.

"Betray me and I shall kill you!" he hissed, with lips pressed close to the veteran's ear.

With that he passed hastily into the other room and confronted Major Duncan.

For a moment the two men gazed at each other in silence. Then from Ruby Ranger came a quick, gasping cry of surprise, not unmixed with terror, as she staggered back, exclaiming:

"Good heavens! It is John Brown!"

The major started sharply and leveled a sinister glance at the man before him.

"So you are the infernal scoundrel Brown or Black!" he cried.

"Yes, Major Duncan, I am Esau Black! But I am not the villain you believe me. Hear me, then judge!"

"Tell the truth or nothing. You stole my child?"

"I did not! Barmillo was the kidnapper. He brought her to me, representing that she was the child of his dead sister, a Mrs. Ranger, and arranged for me to keep her, agreeing to pay me well. For some months the money came regularly; then it ceased, and for a long time we heard nothing from Barmillo. My wife had become deeply attached to the child, and we determined to keep her, so had her legally bound to us."

"Yet you knew she was my daughter?"

"No! Only a short time ago in Denver an old pard of mine died. On his deathbed he confessed that he had aided a one-eyed man known as Barmillo in stealing the child of a Major Nathan Duncan some years before, and insisted that the girl then in my house and known as Ruby Ranger was the child."

"Questioning him closely, I became convinced that he spoke the truth. He gave me your address, and I determined to write to you, and state the case just as it was."

"Before I could act, however, my wife sickened and died. Then Barmillo suddenly appeared and demanded the girl. In fear of my life, I temporized with him, and, to gain time, arranged to bring the girl to Tiptop, where he should pay me well for my trouble."

"As soon as I was rid of him, I wrote you under cover, not daring even then to appear openly in the matter, and started away with the girl to keep my promise to Barmillo, yet leaving a trail that the veriest novice could follow, for it was my desire that you should secure not only your daughter, but revenge for the wrong done you."

"Your words, certainly, accord well with Detective Goldspur's theory," the major observed, as back to his mind came that interview in the brand-burners' cabin. "But proceed!"

"No, hold!" interrupted a stern voice, and from the eastern room Goldspur suddenly appeared, closely followed by his boy Gimps, while behind them down a rope through the old hatchway came Luke Lightfoot and the sport, Jack Rabbit.

A buzz of astonishment greeted this unexpected appearance, and then as his bonds parted under the keen edge of Gimps's knife Major Duncan warmly gripped the detective's hands.

The confusion lasted but a moment, for Goldspur lifted his hand, and in an impressive tone said:

"Be silent, all! Speak guardedly and make no unnecessary noise, for you are in danger here."

"Below stairs are Spanish John and his men, while Pawnee Bill and our friends surround the house ready to attack."

Then the gaze of the disguised detective turned to the fact of Esau Black, and he sternly said:

"Esau Black, I have heard your story and much of it is false.

"That part relating to your dying pard and his confession is wholly untrue, for you were Barmillo's only ally!"

"'Tis false! I—"

"Stay! Denials are useless! I have sifted every clue, from beginning to end, and I know your part in the gambler's desperate play!

"Now, point out to Major Duncan his daughter—if she is here!"

"Well, she is here!" retorted Black, moistening his parched lips, and he pointed to Ruby Ranger.

The major started eagerly. Then his glance followed the pointing finger, and a faint trace of disappointment or annoyance flitted across his face.

"Major Duncan, if you will examine her right arm, you will find above the elbow a small design pricked in India ink, which you will doubtless recognize."

Black spoke confidently, and there was a triumphant gleam in his eyes. Noting it, Goldspur smiled coldly and nodded, saying:

"Miss Ranger, bare you arm, please!"

Although quite pale, Ruby obeyed in a firm and resolute manner, rolling back her sleeve until the marking could be plainly seen.

The major started sharply and his face grew white.

"It is the design!" he declared in a tremulous voice. "A reduced fac simile of the Ten-Bar brand, placed there, child, when you were an infant!"

"Ruby, you are my daughter!"

"Major Duncan, I am not your daughter!"

Clearly and firmly came the words from the lips of the beautiful girl—an oath and a snarl of fury and disgust from Esau Black!

"Not a word—not a sound, or I'll blow out your brains!" Goldspur warned, jamming a pistol muzzle against the rascal's head.

Duncan started back, aghast.

"Not my daughter!" he gasped. "Girl, what do you mean?"

"Precisely what I say, sir! Do not blame me for the imposture that has been attempted by that man, Esau Black!"

"My name is really Ruby Ranger. My mother married Black when I was a babe. There was a child stolen and brought home by Black when I was about six years old, but it disappeared.

"That child bore just such a mark upon its arm, and, in spite of my mother's earnest protest, this imitation was placed upon mine.

"But we deceived Black. In private we were mother and daughter; before him I was simply a bound girl. Then my mother died, and when we started from Denver I rebelled against my step-father's authority, only to find myself helpless, for he held papers binding me to him until I was eighteen years of age.

"That, sir, is the truth, and I appeal to you to protect me, for in his rage Esau Black will kill me."

"I will protect you!" the major declared, in an impassioned voice. "You shall be my daughter now and evermore!"

"You could have deceived me, Ruby Ranger, and your truth and honor shall not go unrewarded."

A spasm of pain contracted the grim, old face. Then Duncan drew a hand across his brow and slowly turned to the detective.

"So the trail ends, Goldspur!" he said sadly. "I thank God that, while my child seems wholly lost, the search has not been without a good result, for it is worth much to wrest this poor girl from that vampire's clutch."

"True, major, but don't lose hope, yet. This has been only a snarl in the tangled skein. There's just a chance yet."

"That's right—that's right! An' oh! I humbly implores forgiveness!" uttered a choking voice, and Zebulon Peggs, white-faced and trembling, pushed past the detective and fell on his knees before the major.

"I stole yer child!" the cobbler continued, winking furiously to keep the tears from his single eye. "Yas, I did et, Major Duncan!"

"You stole my child!"

"Oh, bagonets! Major, don't look at me so! I on'y tuk her fr'm Black! Mine was dead—jest her age, an' I c'u'dn't help et!"

Duncan stared incredulously at the groveling cobbler. Then, in a flash, something of the truth dawned on him, and he sharply cried:

"Good heavens, man! Do you mean—"

"Ther real Ruby's on yer arm thar, an' ef ye don't believe look fer ther mark."

Quickly Major Duncan ripped open the sleeve, and exposed Polly's shapely arm.

Then a cry of joy burst from his lips, and he strained the unconscious girl to his breast, for imprinted in the pink and white flesh was the tiny Ten-Bar brand, and the lost was found!

CHAPTER XLI.

THE PLUNGE TO DEATH.

Let us return now to the moment when Lightfoot dismounted to scan the scene of the struggle pointed out by Goldspur.

All could see there had been a desperate encounter in the little glade, and all waited most anxiously for the skilled trailer's report.

Soon it was ready.

Four men were in waiting here, ambushed, and roped the major.

"He was taken by surprise, but struggled desperately, and one or more shots were fired, for here is the mark of a bullet on the bole of this sapling.

"But the odds were too great; he was overpowered and taken to that point in the timber yonder, where the horses were in waiting.

"From there the trail is plain and may be readily followed."

Thus spoke Lightfoot, and Goldspur nodded affirmation, for the trailer's report, he knew, was absolutely correct.

Then both men quickly remounted; but before the cavalcade could again set forward, Pawnee Bill and his posse dashed into view not a hundred yards away, and in a moment the force was reunited.

Detailing two of the men to look after the captives and the wounded, the officers combined their forces, started forward at a gallop, and in a few minutes reached the vicinity of the old house.

From the coverts along the creek, the outlaws could be seen passing in and out of the house, and a plan of action was quickly arranged.

Goldspur, Lightfoot, Jack Rabbit and Gimps were to enter the house by way of the old elm and the attic window, under cover of the rifles of the force. If entrance was effected without an alarm, Pawnee and his men were to creep up, surround the house and force the door, while the detective and his men charged the outlaws from above. Thus, the captives would be saved, while Spanish John, caught between two fires, would surely be captured or slain.

The signals were quickly agreed upon, and Goldspur and his daring pards crept away, and gained the interior of the old house, as we have seen.

Of course, in the intense excitement of the moment, the participants in that strange scene on the second floor of the old ranch house wholly forgot the detective's warning, and there was more or less confusion.

Indeed, Goldspur himself so far forgot the presence of Spanish John and the outlaws below as to utter an ejaculation of pleased surprise at the denouement, which he had but dimly foreseen.

Polly, as we must continue to call Ruby Duncan, recovered in a moment, and blushed rosily when she found herself in the major's arms.

"Don't be frightened, little girl! You are my daughter," Duncan explained, with beaming eyes.

"You daughter, sir?"

"Yes, dear. You were stolen from me long ago," and the father briefly explained.

The girl's eyes opened wide with wonder. A faint suspicion of the truth had flashed upon her during that colloquy between Duncan and Ruby Ranger—a suspicion that was vitally strengthened by the marking on the latter's arm, and made a certainty by Peggs's avowal; yet, there was much that she did not understand.

"And poor Poppy—am I to leave him?" she asked, with a sigh.

"Not unless you wish it, my dear child. Zebulon Peggs has my lasting gratitude for taking you away from that scamp of a Black. Although in one sense a crime, yet it was an act that did credit to his humanity. Yes, he and his wife shall go with us, if you like."

"That's real good of you, Papa Duncan. And then, there's Luke."

"Luke?"

"Yes," and Polly slipped out of the major's arms and ran to her lover, whose white, tensely-drawn face she that moment espied.

"Well! Bless my soul!" the major gasped, and then Polly, dragging Luke by the hand, confronted him.

"You see, Papa Duncan, it's just like this: If I go with you, Luke goes, too!"

"Luke and I have been married over a month!"

"Hoh, 'eavens! Poppy do you 'ear that?" gasped Mommy. "Dear 'art, who'd ha—"

The door was flung open at that juncture, and Spanish John stepped into the room. At sight of the detective and his followers, the villain started, and his hands dropped quickly to his weapons.

Before he could draw, however, a sharp, wolfish snarl came from Esau Black, and he flung himself upon the gambler.

Then followed a furious struggle, and ere a hand could be lifted to separate the two men they had whirled through the doorway of the east room, followed by the detective and his aids.

The old floor creaked and groaned; then both men fell heavily; a section gave way, and then shot downward.

At the same moment a pistol cracked somewhere below.

"Come, pards!" Goldspur cried. "Pawnee is at hand—we have work to do!"

Followed by Lightfoot and Jack Rabbit, the detective hurriedly crossed the middle room, and ran to the stairway.

Gimps attempted to join in the rush, but a firm hand gripped his collar, and he found himself confronted by the major.

"Let loose, Nate, ole boy!" the urchin yelled, striving to slip out of his coat. "Men are wanted down thar!"

"Not much, my lad! You're going to stay here till I teach you manners!"

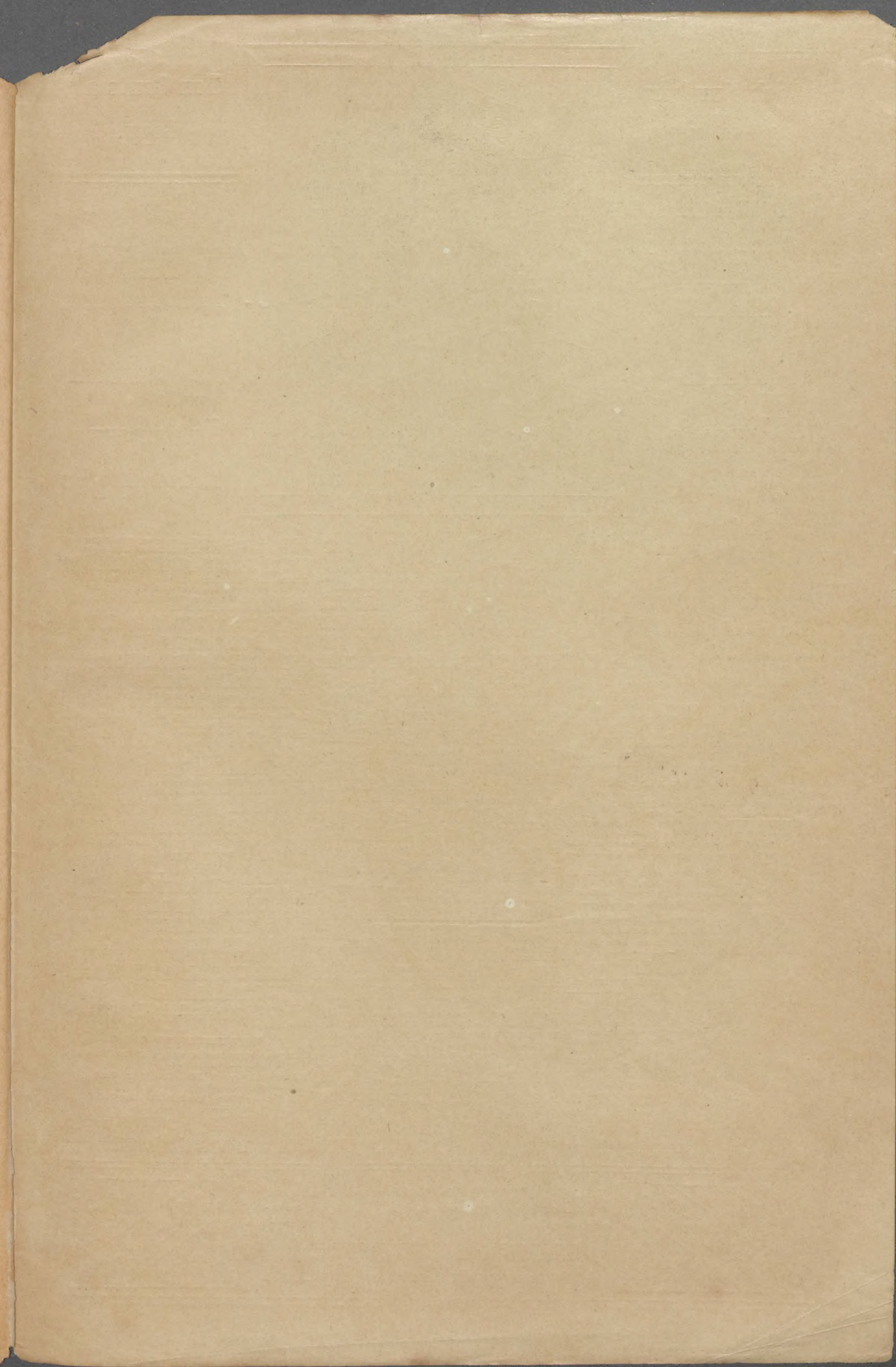
"Know ye, you are my nephew—my only sister's child, and I've taken you in hand—for keeps!"

The outlaws below stairs were caught like rats in a trap, but fought viciously. A dozen shots rang out—Rubert Belmont fell, mortally wounded—Jack Rabbit with a ball through his shoulder—and the struggle was ended. The four outlaws surrendered.

Then a glance into the east room discovered a terrible sight. The fall of Spanish John and his foe through the floor had been a veritable plunge to death, for the deadly serpents lurking there had stung them repeatedly, and both were dead when taken out.

With the battle at the corral and the skirmish at the old ranch house, the power of the brand-burners was broken; through the box of letters taken from the burning cabin, "Captain Brand's" agents and "outside men" were also apprehended and convicted, and thus was one of the most dangerous bands that ever infested fair Oklahoma destroyed.

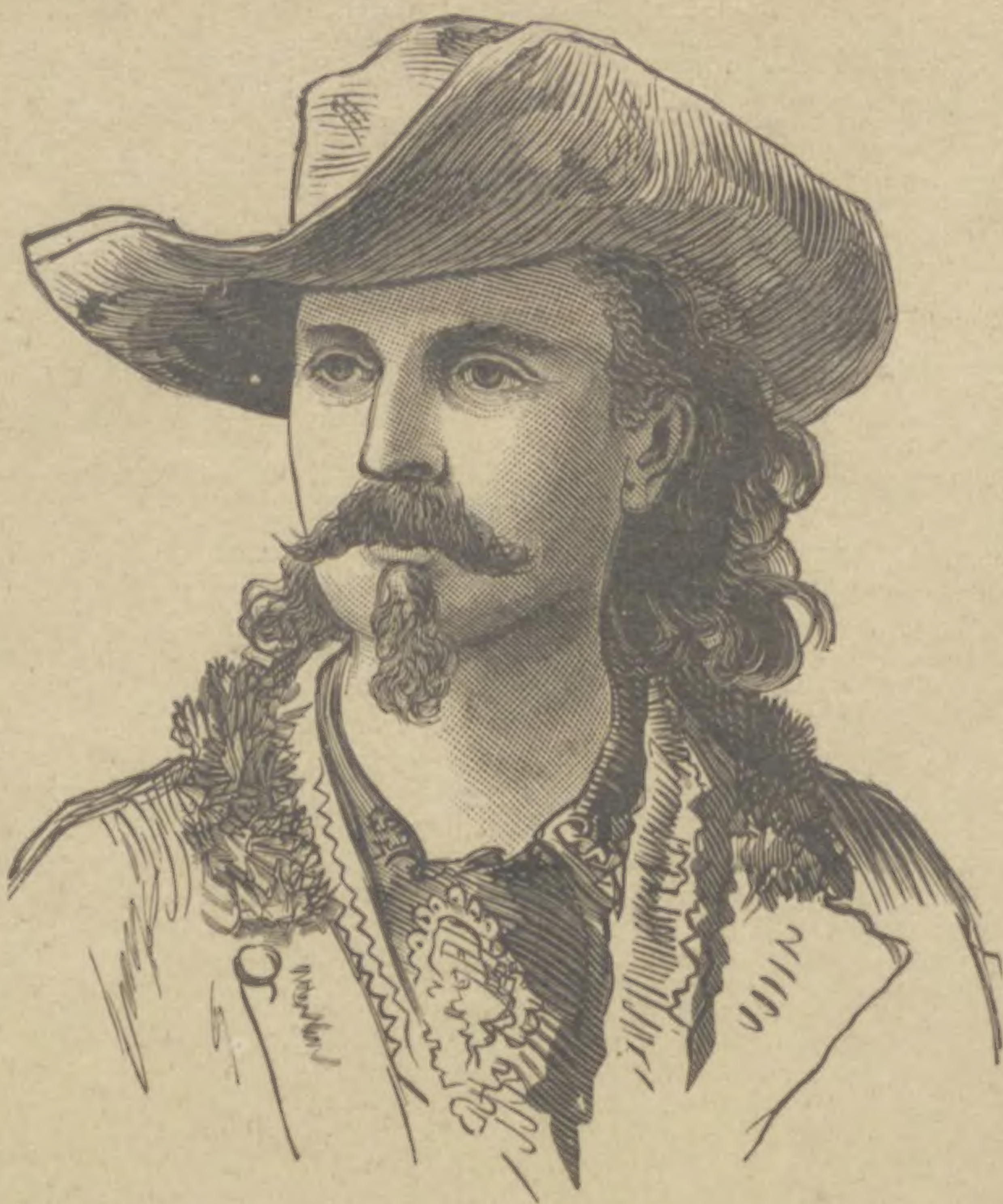
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